UNIT 1 HIS STORY AND HISTORY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to provide you with some of the indispensable biographical details as well as the historical context of the novella. We shall, that is, look into the circumstances of the author, and the historical situation in which he lived and wrote. To what extent, if at all, did the public sphere intrude into his private sphere and his imagination? How was his Congo experience imaginatively reconstructed? These are some of the questions that we shall discuss here.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Though, by definition, a work of fiction is, if you permit me the tautology, fictional, there are works—to give examples from the blocks you have been doing—such as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which draw upon autobiography, and yet others—such as Forster's *A Passage to India*—which are born out of historical situations. Hence the importance of biography and the socio-political context of an author can hardly be exaggerated, especially in the case of Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness*. This is corroborated by the title of a book: *Joseph Conrad: The Fiction of Autobiography* by a critic as perceptive as Edward Said.

Now let us read the following passages carefully:

> 1.What biographical event (if any) occasioned the work? What research (if any) went into its creation? What psychological or social factors determined its meaning? Yet, however impressive its eventual results, the question with which it began—the nature of the relationship between art and life—would remain unresolved. We would have learnt a good deal about Conrad's biography; we would have acquired a number of facts about his work. But as to the relationship between the two, we would remain as ignorant as when we started. (Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*, p.1).

> 2. Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, when I grow up I will go there. The north pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour's off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been on some of them, and ... well, we wont talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after. (Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*).

3. Regions unknown! My imagination could depict to itself their worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the edges attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling ....

Once only did that enthusiasm (for geography) expose me to the derision of my schoolboy chums. One day, putting my finger on a spot of the then white heart of Africa, I declared that some day I would go there...about eighteen years afterwards, a wretched little sternwheel steamboat I commanded lay moored to the bank of an African river. I was glad to be alone on deck, smoking the pipe of peace after an anxious day.... Away in the middle of the stream, on a little island nestling all black in the foam of the broken water, a solitary little light glimmered feebly, and I said to myself in awe, 'This is the very spot of my boyhood boast'.

(Conrad, "Geography and Some Explorers", 1924)

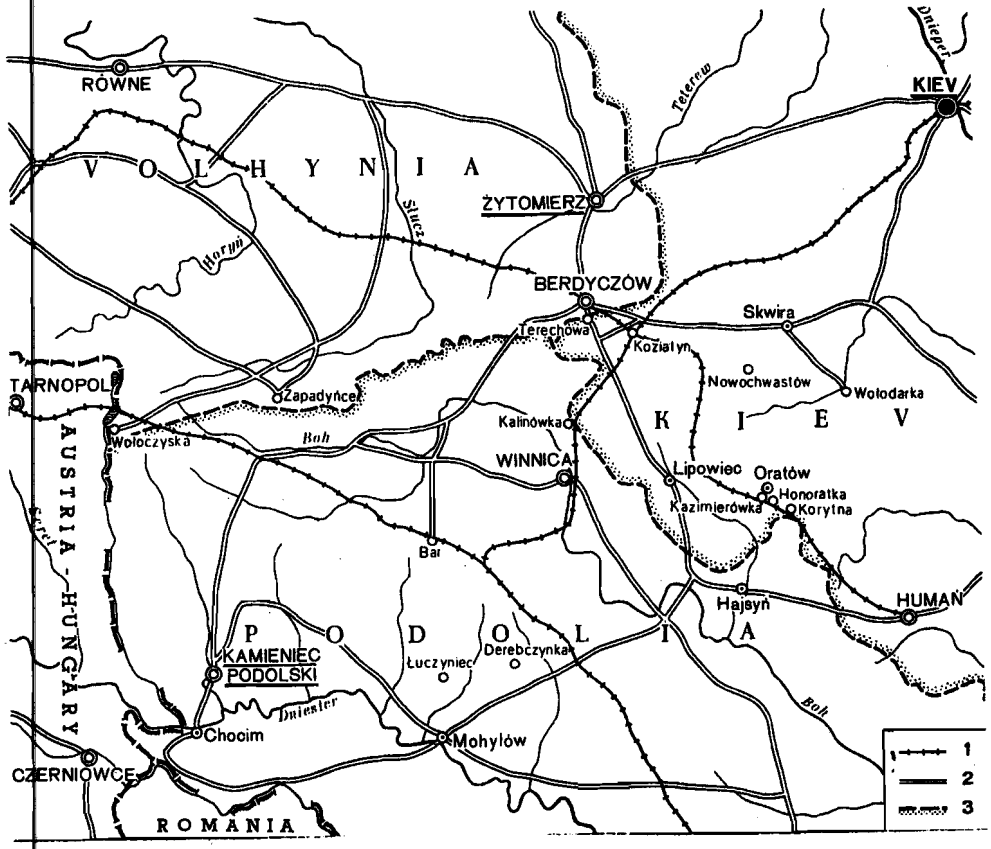
Do you not think that the second and third passages echo each other? And that the fact in one is not vastly different from the fiction in the other? Together do they not undermine the importance of the first? Though I do not want to suggest that the author's biography is the sole guide to his fictional world, I shall be loath to avoid biography and history in my approach to the novella. Yet critics have noted Conrad's "evasive lucidity". Edward Said, in the book I mentioned a little while earlier, addresses this issue. He speaks of the novelist "hiding himself within rhetoric" in his fiction. Whether you agree with him or not, Said's view is well worth keeping in mind. If we know some of his views, and the context in which they were held or expressed, and their fictional rendering, we might arrive at a better understanding of the significance of his fiction and its relation with the historical context.

1.2 JOSEPH CONRAD

Map 1: Europe in Conrad's Time

1.2.1 Home And Homo Duplex

Before we begin, please take a look at the map of Europe of the nineteenth century and Conrad's Poland. You will notice that these look strange. Note the differences between them and their counterparts in the present times in your own atlas. If you do not already know much about nineteenth century Polish history try to gather some information. However, to help you meet your immediate needs, I provide below a few relevant details on which you can build a more adequate picture of mid- ninteenth century Poland, and European imperialism.



Map 2: Conrad's Poland

I am giving you the trouble by digressing from the main task of reading the text with you immediately, because so much depends on your understanding of what once Conrad told a fellow Polish exile: "Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning. You will understand me. I shall not dwell upon that subject" (Conrad, quoted in Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*). This admission has several implications for our understanding of the Conrad text; and despite Conrad's confidence that the reader will understand him, generations of critics have made contradictory claims about the intentions of the author here. Even so, one of the implications of Conrad's statement for our reading of the text at hand would be to see why Marlow, the Englishman, is his favourite raconteur. And, both this latter conjecture about his point of view, literally taken, and his dual status need to be pursued

at some length. His status as the homo duplex or double man has many dimensions: he was a Polish nobleman and British citizen; he was successful both as a mariner and an author; an insistent moralist and unabashed sceptic; pessimistic as well as human.

1.2.2 From Konrad to Conrad

Born Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski on 3 December 1857 in Poland, Joseph Conrad assumed his English name and citizenship as if to escape history. For the country of his birth was not what you now see in your map of Europe. It had been, by the end of the eighteenth century, annexed by Russia in the east, Prussia in the west, and Austria in the south. The part in which Conrad was born and grew up was under the control of Tsarist Russia. These biographical details are necessary if you are to understand his view of himself as a homo duplex, and also why he was to become such a trenchant critic of imperialism. His father Apollo Korzeniowski was a patriotic member of the land-owning class known in Polish as *szlachta* (Polish for nobleman); and was involved in the historical struggle to free his homeland from the Russian imperialists. In 1861, when Conrad was barely four years old, his father was found plotting and was incarcerated in Warsaw and later the Korzeniowskis were exiled to the remote province of Vologda. Conrad's mother died in 1865. Father and son moved to Lwow. When Conrad, the only child of his parents, learnt to read and write he kept his father company by reading up a lot of literature, for his father was himself a poet, translator, and dramatist. Apollo died in 1869, and from then on Conrad was looked after by his maternal uncle. Continued ill-health and privation would mean that, he was privately tutored with only occasional schooling. Thus his life so far was one of sickness, loneliness, and intense emotional despair, long journeys across Russia and Poland, a haphazard and spotty education, and little opportunity to make his own friends.

Yet, recalling his earliest days, Conrad would say that he used to think of himself as "Pole, Catholic, Gentleman" (Baines, 14). One of his childhood fantasies was what you have already read above (see the third quotation in 1.1). This dream of Conrad's wouldn't have materialised but for his uncle, Thaddeus Bobrowski, who, until his death in 1894, served Conrad as father, friend, and financial supporter. Theirs was a love-hate relationship: Conrad was the young and romantic dreamer of a maritime life of reckless adventure while his uncle, preferred a sedate life of a conformist, worldly-wise and moralistic.

Orphaned at the age of 11, Conrad continued his education in Cracow and later in Lwow, with occasional trips out of Poland for his health: all of this arranged by his uncle. Bored with the regimentation and order of his schools and his uncle's household, by October 1874, he was convinced that he should go to France to join the French merchant marine. Since much of Conrad's fiction was haunted by figures who shared his own sense of guilt and betrayal, it would be worthwhile asking why he should have left Poland at all. Later in life, he would try to rationalise his interest in the sea by ascribing it to his reading of novels of adventure and books of travel and exploration. But he had more practical reasons to flee Poland. His school life was boring. Poland, his part of it, was not a free country, but worse, dangerous for the only child of Apollo, a martyr for Polish independence. If not with his life, he would have had to pay dearly for his father's "misdeeds" by doing military service in the Russian army up to twenty-five years. Also his uncle may have felt relieved by the departure of his errant ward for purely selfish reasons, and for the young man's safety, wanted him to take up either British or French citizenship. Conrad first went to France (Marseilles), where his uncle had connections in the merchant marine. Many who knew him were surprised at his decision, accusing him even of betrayal. In the French city, Conrad was excited to mingle with a rich, variegated and cosmopolitan crowd, where, as he himself was to say, "the puppy opened his eyes", and "life" began. (Conrad, *Letters*). The five years in Marseilles were memorable, proving to be influential in his formative stage since they also brought disappointments to the young man. It is perhaps because of these years in France that a third dimension must be added to the homo duplex image fostered by Conrad himself. After several attempts to start a proper marine career in France, Conrad formed a syndicate with three other men, acquired a small vessel, *Tremolino*, and engaged in gun-running between France and Spain (1877-78). Through the treachery of one of the crew, the vessel was ambushed and

lost. Conrad attempted suicide out of utter frustration and helplessness. His uncle rushed to nurse the injured Conrad, pay his debts and moralise on the matter of suicide. (Compare this with the suicide of one of the two main characters in "An Outpost of Progress".) Having lost his reputation in France he tried to secure a job on board a British freighter. On the 18th of June 1878, he arrived in England for the first time with an English vocabulary of about a hundred words. He took time to secure a seamanship; but by 1880 he could master enough skills in his job and the new language to be able to pass his examination as second mate, and obtained an officer's position in a clipper to sail to Australia.

He now acquires a trilingual and tricultural identity. **Such hybridity makes him a marginal man; wherever he may have been he did not belong to that place wholly.** At this point we must remember the contrary pulls that such a shift in guardianship entailed: his father's idealist, nationalistic fervour and enlightened conservatism was markedly the opposite of the uncle's practical, conservative approach to life. These opposed pulls further contributed to Conrad's dual affinities.

What do you think are or could have been the implications of such biographical features for Conrad? Stop here and ponder for a few minutes before you read on. Now compare your ideas with mine: If you ask me, I shall agree entirely with the critic who thinks that the "inheritance was both a sensitivity to oppressive autocracy and a profound scepticism about the idealism of social, and particularly nationalistic, movements" (Andrea White). Yet another critic insists that every aspect of Conrad's youth and later development was affected by Russian rule and by the Russian occupation of Poland (Jean H. Szczypien). Conrad, thus, was to experience two great empires: the Russian and the British; was a victim of the first, and served the second. Also, he gave up a successful marine career, and took up the risky business of book-writing. Did these biographical-historical factors have anything to do with the kind of books he wrote? So, as I have said before, one cannot understand Conrad's view of imperialism without a working knowledge of his personal-national identity. We shall look at this from diverse angles as we go on.

1.3 KING LEOPOLD AND THE CONGO

The nineteenth century was notable for European imperialism. Belgium was late in joining this "scramble for loot". In fact the Belgians did not approve of King Leopold's brand of private imperialism. For they had achieved their own independence after a long struggle, and had no desire to subjugate anyone. The father, Leopold the 1st, one of the clever Coburg family who either married into or founded so many of the nineteenth century European royal families, manipulated fortune and negotiated himself to the position of the first King of the Belgians. He was concerned primarily with the establishing and securing of his dynasty.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, equatorial Africa was unknown to the Europeans; the maps had not yet been drawn. This is what Conrad meant when he called the area "a blank space of delightful mystery". But soon missionaries, explorers, and scientists were to unravel the mystery, soon to be followed by rapacious businessmen and commercial houses who began exploiting the resources, material and human. Both private and governmental agents were involved in these exploits if only because an industrial Europe had begun seeking markets and raw material. David Livingstone, the Scot medical missionary and "Her Majesty's consul for Inner and Unexplored Africa," disappeared into east central Africa in 1866 at the request of the Royal Geographical Society to settle the question of the river basins of southern Africa. Stanley, in a spectacular expedition sponsored by the New York *World Telegram* as a publicity stunt, went "looking for" Livingston (who did not regard himself as lost) and "found" him at Ujiji on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in November 1871. Leopold's interest in Congo came after the expedition of Stanley. And soon his men met the explorer to join the King's "civilising mission in Africa". In 1885, Stanley wrote about his mission:

> On the 14th of August 1879, I arrived before the mouth of this river to ascend it, with the novel mission of sowing along its banks civilised

settlements, to peacefully conquer and subdue it, to remould it in harmony with modern ideas into National States, within whose limits the European merchant shall go hand in hand with the dark African trader, and justice and law and order shall prevail, and murder and lawlessness and the cruel barter of slaves shall forever cease.

See in the map the route that Conrad took, and what fictional names he gave to such actual names as Stanley Pool and Stanley Falls on the north bank of the river. From 1885 to 1908, the Congo "Free State" was cruelly exploited until the exploitation crossed all "civilised" limits, which aroused international anger against Leopold's tactics. Of course, the King received support from international finance agencies. The profits were enormous, coming from, mostly, ivory. One such organisation, was to employ Conrad.

Africa, then, came to figure not only in the geographical map of the Europeans, but also in their mental landscapes. The two were not necessarily similar. Africa was now available to them, in Edward Said's words, in terms of an "imaginative geography" (*Orientalism*). This Orientalist attitude of the European was to equip him as inevitably as the "map, mosquito boots, or solar topi" (White). Africa was constructed for them imaginatively or mythically by writers, travel as well as fictional. It was in a sense both discovery and invention. To what purpose? The answer to this is complex and not easily answered. Conrad of course gives his own answer, if such rich ambiguities as the novella under study can be called answers.

1.4 THE WHITE MAN IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

After moving to England in 1878, Conrad continued to try and fulfil his life's ambition; and after a few years, sea life quickly lost its romance. In 1886, he became a naturalised British citizen, and continued to serve various ships of the British Merchant Navy, which he had joined, in the meantime. Sometime in 1889, after he had resigned from the command of *Otago*, and was in forced idleness in England, he must have become familiar with Stanley's first reports of his exploits in the London *Times*. Well-read in adventure stories, he had begun writing and continued to struggle with his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. While looking for a ship, he secured an introduction to Albert Thuys, an aide-de-camp of King Leopold II. Around this time an organisation called *Societe Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo* was founded by the king ostensibly to develop the upper Congo Basin and a railway between the mouth of the Congo river and Stanley Pool (See Map III). Thuys interviewed Conrad twice; probably he was also helped by his "aunt" Marguerite Poraowska, a well-connected confidant of his. After delays, there was a breakthrough, and he sailed for the Congo, reaching Matadi six weeks later facing the heart of darkness (See Map III and IV) .

For, from now on Conrad kept two diaries, one of which provides a daily account of his journey of about 250 miles from Matadi to Nselemba near Stanley Pool, beginning with "Arrived at Matadi on the 13th of June, 1890." Not a few of the entries there resemble the incidents in *Heart of Darkness.*

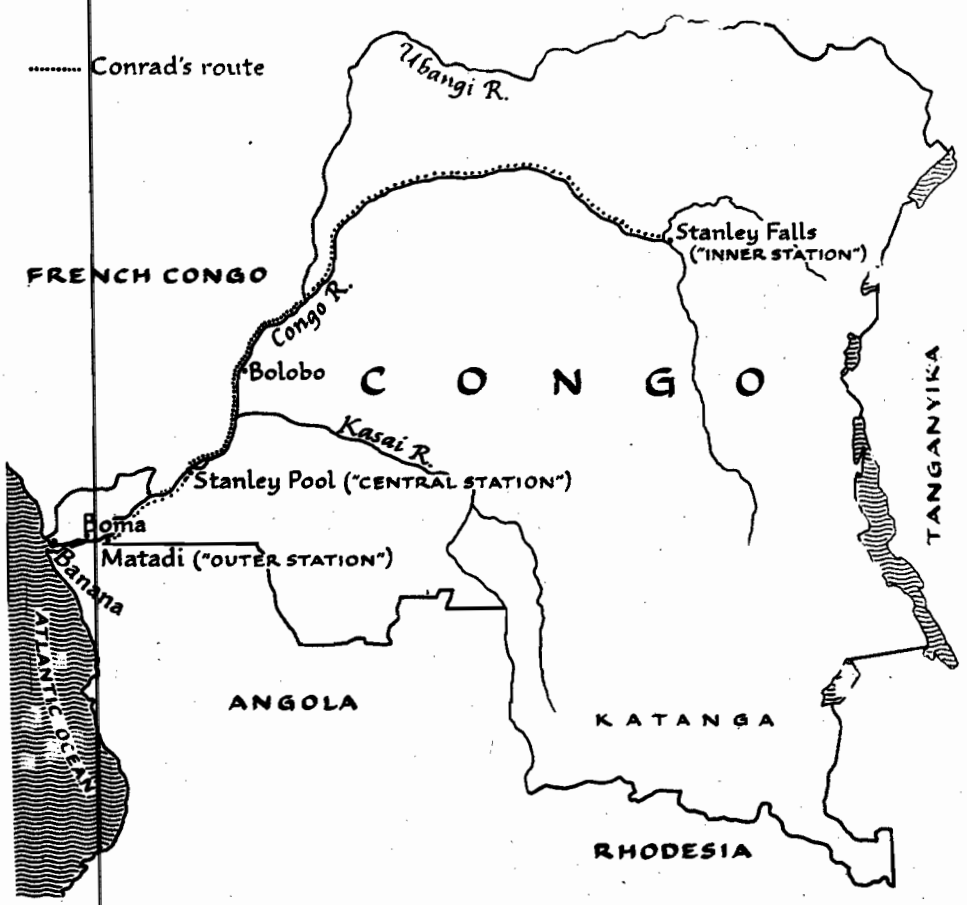
The upper part of the gigantic, python-like river, where the currents were navigable, was cut off from the rapids of Matadi. Thus all the provisions and other necessities of life were carried by porters. The image of the serpent-like river and the task of carrying the requirements of empire-building are to be found in *Heart of Darkness*. The steamboats too were taken apart and carried off to be reassembled when navigation was possible. The railway was to be completed only in 1897. Conrad found the entire exercise dismal, monotonous, and uncomfortable, if not horrifying on occasions. He noted depressing details in his diary: "On the road today passed a skeleton tied to a post. Also white man's grave—no name—heaps of stone in form of a cross." Nineteen days after they began the journey they reached the port area of Stanley Pool (the Central Station of *Heart of Darkness).* Soon he was on board a steamer as mate on its way to Stanley Falls to relieve an ailing company agent by the name of Klein (you may be surprised to know that

Conrad had originally thought of giving this name to the character, Kurtz). The following recollection accurately captures Conrad's disillusionment with the entire enterprise, and also his disgust at the publicity surrounding Stanley:

> a great melancholy descended on me. Yes, this was the very spot. But there was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of the enormous wilderness...only the unholy recollection of a prosaic newspaper 'stunt' and *the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.* (my italics; "Geography and Some Explorers", 1924).

Klein died on their return journey, when Conrad was in charge of the steamer after Captain Koch fell ill at Stanley Falls. Though, as I have said before, Klein was Kurtz's original name, the parallels between the real and fictional characters are only superficial. It is much safer to assume that much of Conrad's own experience, brooding, and the gossips and yarns he heard about many other adventurers went into the chracter of Kurtz. Anyway, relationships with his associates, who he said in a letter had "the gift of getting on my nerves", deteriorated fast; and when his pleadings with the officials in Brussels did not help, he returned to England prematurely in November 1891 with gout, rheumatism, neuralgia, and malaria. All this while he had been struggling with his first novel. But such was the intensity of his Congo experience that he could recapture the horror of it all in *Heart of Darkness* eight years later with full force.

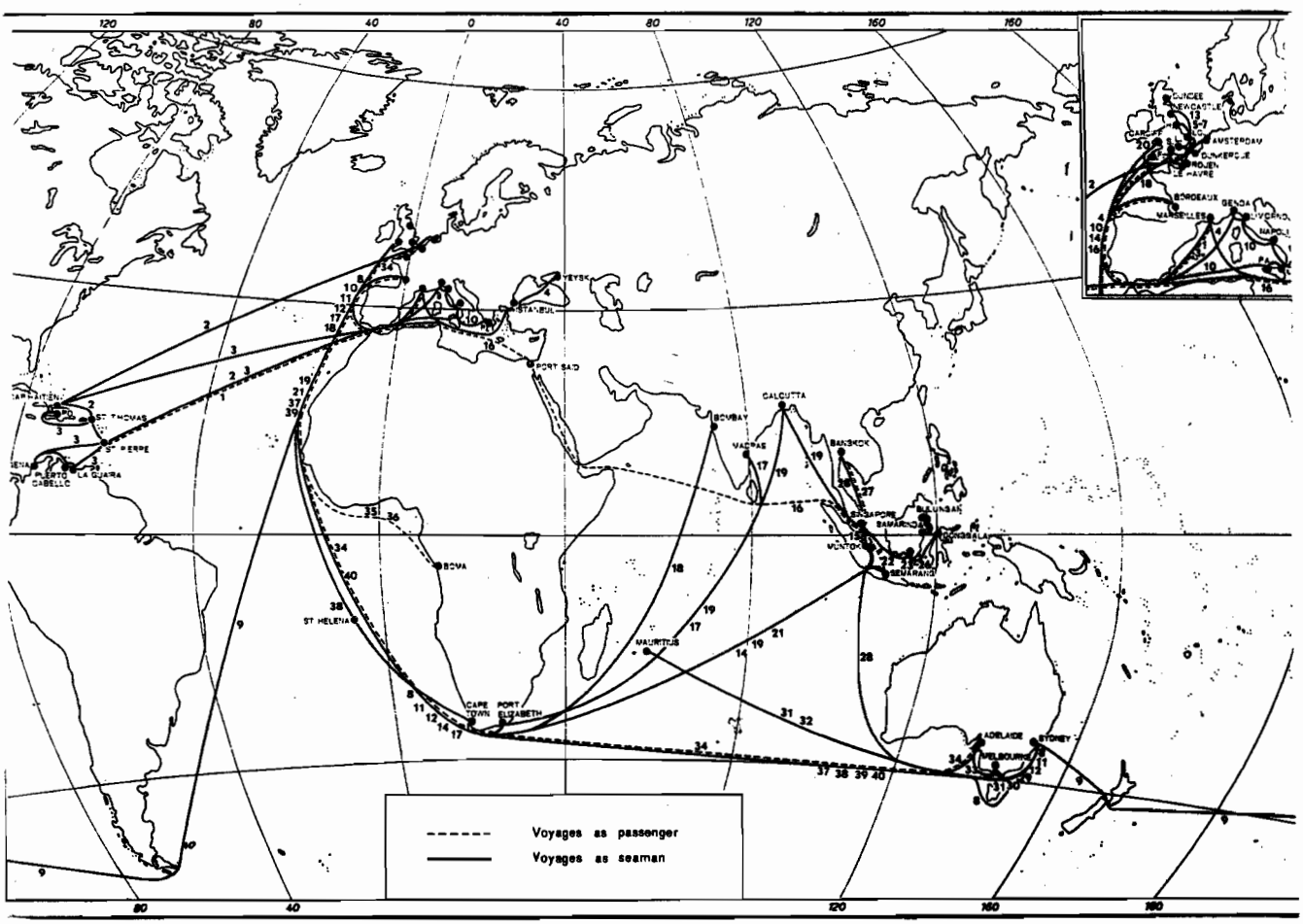
Map III



What were Conrad's assumptions about Africa? We have read about his childhood dreams; we have also seen the way the "dark" continent was imaged and imagined in the white world. Though we have talked about Conrad's criticism of the colonial enterprise in his fiction, it would be a mistake to think that he had held a similar view all along. In fact, his pre-Congo views were vastly different. They were conservative in the best tradition of mainstream British imperial ideology. After all, by the time Conrad began working in the British Merchant Service in 1878, European imperial rule over the non-European world extended to nearly two-thirds of the Earth's land surface, and Britain's empire had a major share in the booty: colonies in Oceania, New Zealand and Australia, and the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, to India, Canada, Africa, the Caribbean, China, and a more informal empire of trade in South America, and the British Empire. Thus the empire Conrad served was extensive . By the end of the century, it would expand much more.

We can now perhaps understand why Conrad, a recently naturalised British subject, should have spoken of himself at this time as a "Polish nobleman, cased in British tar" with some degree of implied pride (*Letters*, I, p. 52). For by now the "hospitable shores of Great Britain" were what he could call "home" (*Letters* I, p. 12). His sympathies were clearly conservative. A few years before, he had written to a friend, expressing his unhappiness over the victory of the Liberals in the recently concluded elections for the British parliament. With this victory, he said, "all that is respectable, venerable and holy" had disappeared, and the "great British Empire" had "gone over the edge" (*Letters* I, p. 16). Patric Brantlinger has talked about "the Victorian myth of the dark continent", and it is with this and other myths in his ideological baggage that Conrad had approached the Congo. So it was only expected that the young Conrad complained that things were not exactly *pukka* when he was on his way up the Congo.

Map IV: Conrad's Sea Voyages



1.5 THE TITLE OF THE TEXT

On his return from the Belgian Congo, thus, and with his first novel nearly complete, he woke up to the possibility of a new life on dry land. He was rich in experience for a kind of adventure fiction unknown to the English speaking world. "No one has *known,*" Henry James told him, "for intellectual use—the things you know." But it was only in 1896 that he began to use his Congo experience. About the first story "An Outpost of Progress" he wrote to his publisher:

> It is a story of the Congo. There is no love in it and no woman—only incidentally. The exact locality is not mentioned. All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw—all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy have been with me again while I wrote. The story is simple—there is hardly any description. The most common incidents are related—the life in a lonely station on the Kassai. I have divested myself of everything but pity—and some scorn—while putting the insignificant events that bring on the catastrophe.

The story in question, beginning with the title is an ironical treatment of the so-called civilising mission that was going on in Africa. Does Conrad's clarification about there being no love or woman in the story have any significance beyond itself? I think it does. It shows what the expectations of the contemporary reader were like. A story had to have a love angle to it with one or more women in it. What was also popular was the travel adventure of the kind popularised by Stevenson and one or two others. Both these expectations of the reader Conrad subverted. Yet what the editor had expected him to give was an adventure. "An Outpost of Progress" was a partial attempt on his part to exorcise the traumatic experience. He succeeds to some extent. But the story does not have the intensity or sophistication of *Heart of Darkness*. His indictment of "the vilest scramble for loot" was to come in a more satisfying way in the latter. Conrad reported to William Blackwood about the progress he had made on a story he had been working on for ten days sometime in December 1898:

> The title I am thinking of is *The Heart of Darkness* [sic] but the narrative is not gloomy. The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinctly—though not topically treated. It is a story as much as my "Outpost of Progress" was but, so to speak "takes in" more—is a little wider—is less concentrated upon individuals.

This also makes evident how Conrad's treatment of a topical subject is not quite stereotypical: instead of valorising the colonial enterprise he is castigating the whole enterprise. A minor point perhaps worth noting is that he uses here the definite article, which is dropped in the title he uses eventually. The reason could be that the *Heart of Darkness* that is portrayed, as we shall see, is not a reference to the centre of Africa, the dark continent; though the irony in the allusion is apparent. *Heart of Darkness* is also the darkness within, particularly within the protagonist's mind; as well as within the white race, as the Romans may have found out two thousand years ago according to what Marlow says. Like its companion pieces ("Youth", "The End of the Tether") *Heart of Darkness* is an

> examination of the encounter between truth and image, abstraction and concreteness, darkness and illumination. The kinship between Marlow and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is sustained on a metaphysical level as kinship between darkness and light, between the impulse toward light sustained by Marlow until he sees Kurtz and the impulse toward light sustained by Kurtz in the deepest darkness. (Said, *Joseph Conrad* , p. 147)

1.6 Let Us Sum Up

Ideology-formation in a sensitive writer is a slow and evolving process, depending on both conscious efforts on his part for practical reasons, and on unconscious, uncontrolable, socio-political forces. In the case of Conrad, the significant experiences/forces of both these kinds were linked to, as we have just seen, his nationality, exile, migration—a process of deliberate selection and rejection. What we saw in this unit is that Conrad's life as a sailor, and his experience of the two empires, one of which he served in his capacity as a mate, had a decisive influence on the ideological underpinnings which his writing carry. We also saw how his experience in the Congo led to a state of mind which produces the African tales. He soon becomes, as his uncle would put it, "a cog...in the machinery of the empire". We now recall the admonition of his uncle when Conrad was going through his Congo experience: "You are probably looking around at people and things as well as at the 'civilising' (confound it) affair...before you feel able to express your own opinion. Don't wait however until it all crystallises into clear sentences, but tell me something of your health and your first impression." We need not worry about what Conrad wrote to his uncle; but his crystallised impression in *Heart of Darkness* is what will immediately preoccupy us. It is surprising that he would deeply resent contemporary attempts to read too much biography into his work, and the emphasis on his life as a mariner.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. What factors in Conrad's life do you think may have contributed to his homo duplex status?

2. Do you think Conrad's life is interesting *per se*, or insofar as it contributes to/enriches our understanding of the text?

3. Do you now feel impelled to read Conrad's letters and his Congo diary? Why?

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Jacques Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase.* Cambridge University Press, 1978.
Dean, L. F. *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'; Backgrounds and Criticisms.* Englewood Cliffs, 1960.
B. Harkness. *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the Critics.* San Francisco, 1960.
Zdzislaw Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle.* New Brunswick:Rutgers University Press, 1983.

UNIT 2 LITERARY ANALYSIS-I

Structure

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2.1 Introduction
2.2 Time and Distance
  2.2.1 Point of View : A Point of View
  2.2.2 Point of View : A New Point of View : Marlow
  2.2.3 Marlow Outside the Heart of Darkness
  2.2.4 Marlow in the Heart of Darkness
  2.2.5 Marlow Framed
2.3 No Boys' Adventure
  2.3.1 Action in Adventure
  2.3.2 Action with A Difference
2.4 Let Us Sum Up
2.5 Questions
2.6 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In 1.1, I quoted two recollections: one by Marlow, the other by Conrad himself; each recalls half-regretfully, half-wistfully his childhood fascination with maps. I wanted you to see the obvious parallels between them. In the meantime, you may have discovered some more similarities between the two of them. Does it mean that there is no essential difference between the two; and that there was no need for Conrad to invent Marlow? Was the need to invent Marlow in any way tied up with deeper questions related to race and nation? If yes, were there further ramifications in terms of style and narrative technique? In Unit 2, we shall explore these questions within the broader context of modernism.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Modernism was largely a reaction against romantic subjectivity. How effective the reaction was, has been a subject of many a debate between literary historians; but the issue is not of our immediate concern here. Rather, we are concerned with the role that Conrad was to play in this reaction or revolution. The chief protagonists of the revolution were yet to occupy centre-stage when Conrad's writing career got under way; and he was to be drawn into active modernist circles later. However, early on, he had started cultivating a literary friendship with the English editor-novelist-collaborator-friend, Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), an instigator of modernism who was to cast a decisive influence on younger contemporaries.

Yet it was not Ford but T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) who gave the formulation of impersonality the vogue it soon acquired. This was to result in various distancing techniques, the dramatic monologue, for example. Prior to this, however, Conrad had presciently and consciously felt the need for distancing the narratorial voice from the personality of the author. This is where his fictional technique of impersonality connects him to the French realists, and looks forward to similar thrusts among the younger modernists. Distancing could be effected, he realised, multi-dimensionally: spatially, temporally, and through the use of multiple points of view. But Conrad's need was not merely aesthetic; i.e., it was not as if he wanted to make stylistic experiments for their artistic effect (not because of what has been called, in Nietzchean terms, the artist's "will to style"). (Nietzsche (1844-1900), as you know was a German philosopher who believed that only the strong ought to survive and his doctrine of the superman is expounded in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Will to Power* etc.).

You will have to think of Conrad's situation at the time he began writing. He was a displaced Pole, with the experience of two great Empires—the Russian and the British—behind him. Having repudiated a past of the first he embraced the present of the second just as he had turned his back upon his successful sailing career in favour of an uncertain writing career in England.

Does the telling of a story have anything to do with these personal minutiae of the author, his life and times, and the larger social and political issues? As we have seen in the last unit, his ideological orientation is certainly governed by these. Questions of technique too, I shall insist, are inseparable from questions of ideological issues concerning the author. Consider the following observation of Frederick Jameson, the well-known Marxist critic:

> In such a situation [Jameson has been talking about the sociological history of the novel, the alienation of the printed book from the Flaubertian moment], it is abundantly clear that the Jamesian invention of point of view (or better still, Henry James's codification of this already existing technique, his transformation of it into the most fundamental of narrative categories, and the development around it of a whole aesthetic) is a genuinely historical act. The subject having been by the logic of social development stripped from its textual object, the latter must now be constructed in such a way as to bear the place of the former within itself.... What is perhaps less understood, even today, about the Jamesian aesthetic is the degree to which point of view is also part and parcel of a whole ideology.

Jameson's context is different even though he is discussing Conrad. But his thesis is no less relevant in the case of Conrad. We shall see this by and by.

2.2 TIME AND DISTANCE

2.2.1 Point Of View : A Point Of View

In your reading of the theory or technique of the English novel (especially in the early theorisation of the novel in say Henry James or Percy Lubbock) you may have already become acquainted with the concept of "point of view". In a realistic novel, generally speaking, the narrative voice is omniscient. The identification between the omniscient narrator or the implied author and the historical author is almost complete. He is the reliable narrator whose point of view is God's eye view, which decides what is right or wrong. Very little is left in terms of open-endedness and ambiguity. Some novelists departed from this and innovations are not unknown: a narrator introducing another who tells a tale. Even before, innovations can be noticed in such pre-novelistic works as the narrative poetry of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The epistolary novels, such as *Clarrisa*, also shift points of view. But even in those exceptions there seems to be an organising consciousness. By the time we get to such modernist texts as Joyce's or Woolf's, the stability of such a narratorial / all-embracing consciousness has disappeared. Appearing in its place is a fractured consciousness and the techniques now employed would be variously called "stream of consciousness" or "*monologue interieur*". The shift/change was, however, not abrupt. There were transitions and mediations. Two key figures in this regard are Henry James and Conrad. You may already be familiar with James's technique of allowing his characters to "speak their minds" as it were; allowing the reader to delve deep into the mind of each character. So I shall not dwell upon James's aesthetic principles here. I shall, much rather, deal with the subject of how Conrad innovates and moves the novel form closer to its modernist *avatar*.

His early tales follow the conventional point of view technique, though he experiments with symbolist and impressionist devices. It is here that I recommend to you the sections in Frederic Jameson's chapter "Romance and Reification" (*The Political Unconscious*). Jameson's remarks about the multiple shifts in a Conrad narrative highlight the fact that

these shifts can be taken as textbook exercises in point of view. Then they are "point of view" conceived as being inseparable from speech. Conrad's kind of thinking "has discovered the symbolic." His practice of style is a literary and textual equivalent of the impressionist strategy of painting "hence his kinship with the greatest of all literary impressionists, Proust".

2.2.2 Point Of View : A New Point Of View

Conrad uses for the first time the third person narrator Marlow in "Youth", a short story. Marlow eventually becomes a transtextual character in many of his novels. The need to use this mask may have arisen because of Conrad's anxiety to adopt an English point of view otherwise denied to him. The anxiety is evident in his initial and inadequate attempt to pass himself off as an Englishman by anglicising his own name. We shall look at this aspect in some detail in the next sections; but suffice it to mention here that had he spoken in his own voice and not ventriloquised through Marlow, questions about the English author-ity of the narrator would be raised. After all, he was a Polish émigré. His self-consciousness becomes evident in many of his early letters and prefaces, where he would ponder over questions of point of view. For example, he would write to a correspondent on 6 September 1897 "This necessity from my point of view is fascinating". On 2 November 1895 he writes again, "When I speak about writing from an inward point of view—I mean from the depth of our own inwardness." Much later, in 1907, he was still writing about treating the subjects of "war, peace, and labour" from the "modern point of view". So what angle to see from, what to write from was one of the obsessive strains in his discussion of literature. Beginning with "Youth", he ensured that through Marlow he could present his own complex experiences and ideas, even while maintaining an appropriate ironic distance.

2.2.3 Marlow Outside The "Heart of Darkness"

In his early novels, such as *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Nigger of the Narcissus,* Conrad employs the voice of the traditional omniscient narrator. In these, particularly in the third, he had no difficulty with the point of view as he did not see the need to distance himself from the narrating subject. His expressed ideology at that time was very close to the official British ideological stance: reactionary and imperial as most of it was. Writing for the imperialist paper *New Review* then edited by W.E. Henley he dedicated the story to Edward Garnett, who had advised him to write sea fiction if he wanted to succeed commercially in England. The novel's version of social and political England was coloured by Conrad's anxiety to please the editor. Unsurprisingly the tale was anti-sentimental, masculine, even oligarchic. However, the Englishness of the tale is awkward; the awkwardness springing largely from the lack of distance between the narrator and the author. Conrad failed to reconcile the viewpoint of the narrator who has immediate but limited knowledge with that of a narrator who has the reflective scope of hindsight.

The decisive change in his fictional technique occurred during his "*Blackwood* phase" (1898-1902). For this was when he tried to negotiate with his English cultural identity and audience. One after the other he contributed three tales ("Youth", *Heart of Darkness,* and *Lord Jim,* which were serialised) to *Maga*, as *Blackwood's Magazine* was familiarly known. It was in the first of these that Marlow made his debut as the chief narrator-protagonist, and the aforementioned reconciliation was now possible.

John Galsworthy once made the perceptive remark that "though English in name" Marlow is not so in nature. This is very close to Conrad's description of himself as someone whose "point of view is English" both on sea and on land; but "the conclusion should not be drawn that [he] has become an Englishman." Thus Marlow appears to be at first sight his alter ego. But on closer scrutiny the two emerge as separate entities. The invention of Marlow is because of Conrad's felt need for distancing himself from his narrator-persona. This helps the author to control and organise his experience without sentimentalising it. Charles Marlow is unmistakably an English name, which fact enables the contemporary English readers of *Maga* to identify themselves chauvinistically with

the seeing and experiencing eye of Marlow (for Conrad's motto to make his reader *see*, see a later section). Conrad too had shed his English name when he started writing; yet "Conrad" gave him away. As Zdzislaw Najder comments perceptively about the difference between the two :

> Marlow, a model English gentleman, ex-officer of the merchant marine, was the embodiment of all Conrad would wish to be if he were to become completely anglicised. And since that was not the case, and since he did not quite share his hero's point of view, there was no need to identify himself with Marlow, either emotionally or intellectually. Thanks to Marlow's duality [different from his own status as homo duplex], Conrad could feel solidarity with, and a sense of belonging to, England by proxy, at the same time maintaining a distance such as one has toward a creation of one's imagination. Thus, Conrad, although he did not permanently resolve his search for a consistent consciousness of self-identity, found an integrating point of view that enabled him, at last, to break out of the worst crisis of his writing career.

When Conrad started writing for *Maga* he did so with the awareness that "There isn't a single club and messroom and man-of-war in the British Seas and Dominions which hasn't a copy of *Maga*...." So, when he wrote "Youth" for the first time for the magazine, he narrated the story from the point of view of Marlow, a typical British seaman, and as someone who could explore his reader's cultural traits and values by indirection, and as an insider. The narrator who introduces Marlow does so as an outsider, who has an idealised view of England, to win over the English reader, as it were: "This could have occurred [nowhere] but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate". Thus Conrad uses a double vision for a very complex response to British imperialism, and by implication, to European imperialism.

His ambiguity had already been in display in the way he would treat his Congo experience in a tale, "An Outpost of Progress" a year before the publication of the *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. The irony occurs not only in the title but also *technically*: through the difference between how the two characters Kayerts and Carlier regard themselves and what the narrator thinks of their "mission". There also seems to be an intended pun on the word "progress"; both as advancement in terms of civilisation, as well as movement forward as an adventure or action. This propensity to pun on the word remained with Conrad until he gave it up to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

Its narrator is sardonically relativistic, as becomes evident from the following comment on his part:

> few men realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd; to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion.

When they move towards self-destruction under the silliest possible circumstance, Kayerts shoots Carlier before committing suicide himself. The narrator posits:

> His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director.

Conrad perhaps wants us to see in this image his own response to imperialism; and the tale sticks out its tongue irreverently, mocking at Belgian imperialism in "Free State Congo", at imperialism generally, and at the *hubris* of civilisation. Hubris, as you know, is a Greek word that means arrogance, pride. It is an important term in the discussion of

Greek tragedy. The Europeans in spite of their "civilisation" are not necessarily the fittest race. It is the natives who maintain their sanity. The final irony, however, seems to lie in the actual, physical context of the story. For, alongside Conrad's story people must have read the essay by Henry Norman, a well-known political commentator for the same magazine in which both had appeared: "We are Imperialists first, and Liberals or Tories afterwards. I said this, for my own part, years ago, when the sentiment was not quite so popular. Now it has happily become commonplace." The tale effectively gets an opportunity to cock a snook at such cocky points of view. Conrad knew that such an ideological thrust will not be an attractive proposition for the *Maga* people, neither the editor nor the readership. So when he came to contribute "Youth" to it, he deliberately makes Marlow elaborate on the national character of the English. This was a well-directed strategy aimed at co-opting the readership of the magazine, exploiting their ideological mindset. At this point two things are to be kept in mind. **One** is the cultural context: an ongoing debate about whether the so-called English spirit was on the wane, a weakening of the spirit, body and the will. Most discussions in newspapers would insist that they *were* indeed on the wane. "Youth" on the other hand, inveighed against the argument. **Secondly**, Conrad would change the emphasis in drafts for serial publications.

Marlow praises the crew for their exemplary discipline and will: "That crew of Liverpool hard cases had in them the right stuff", as if to reassure the English reading public. "It's my experience they always have", he repeats for emphasis. This sentence was an exclusive addition for the magazine. He effected significant and suitable alterations in matters of detail when he came to fictionalise his 1892 experience: the cosmopolitan crew were turned into an all-English crew for the same reason, as critics have not failed to notice. Such partisan Englishness was to change, as I have said before, as Conrad became more confident of his success in literary England.

2.2.4 Marlow And The Heart Of Darkness

Yet, he continued to be cagey, when he wrote about *The Heart of Darkness* (the definite article was part of the original title) to the great publisher William Blackwood. Conrad was worried whether the subject would commend itself to him. As you read the following extract from the letter, mark the apologia on the way:

> The title I am thinking of is *The Heart of Darkness* but the narrative is not gloomy. The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinctly—though not topically treated. It is a story as much as my *Outpost of Progress* was but, so to speak "takes in" more—is a little wider—is less concentrated upon individuals.

But this apologia is prefaced by a reference to another of his earlier works, "Youth", which was ideologically congenial to Blackwood. The intention again is obvious:

> It is a narrative after the manner of *Youth* told by the same man dealing with *his* [my emphasis] experience on a river in Central Africa. The *idea* in it is not as obvious as in *Youth*—or not at least so obviously presented. I tell you all this, for tho' I have not doubts as to the *workmanship* I do not know whether the *subject* will commend itself to you for that particular number.

The "particular number" was the thousandth issue of the magazine. You must notice Conrad's confidence about the workmanship, by which I suppose he means the technique. For his experiments begin by being traditional. He uses the convention of the "frame narrator", a convention that was especially popular with *Maga*, already popularised by such writers as Wells, Kipling and Stevenson. This again had its cultural roots in the club culture in which travellers or adventurers would relate their stories or spin a yarn. You may have encountered such a storyteller relating his strange adventure in Wells' *Time Machine*. Conrad's tales are removed from the comfort and security of the club, and are situated symbolically on decks with endless waters around. Thus the convention is followed in the breach of it. Another aspect of the conventional trick was

that in such tales you may notice the writer's anticipation of the reader doubting the story's veracity, the element of disbelief, such was the strangeness of the tales. Even here Conrad intensifies the common air of incredulity. Look at Marlow's problem and compare it with any other narrator's:

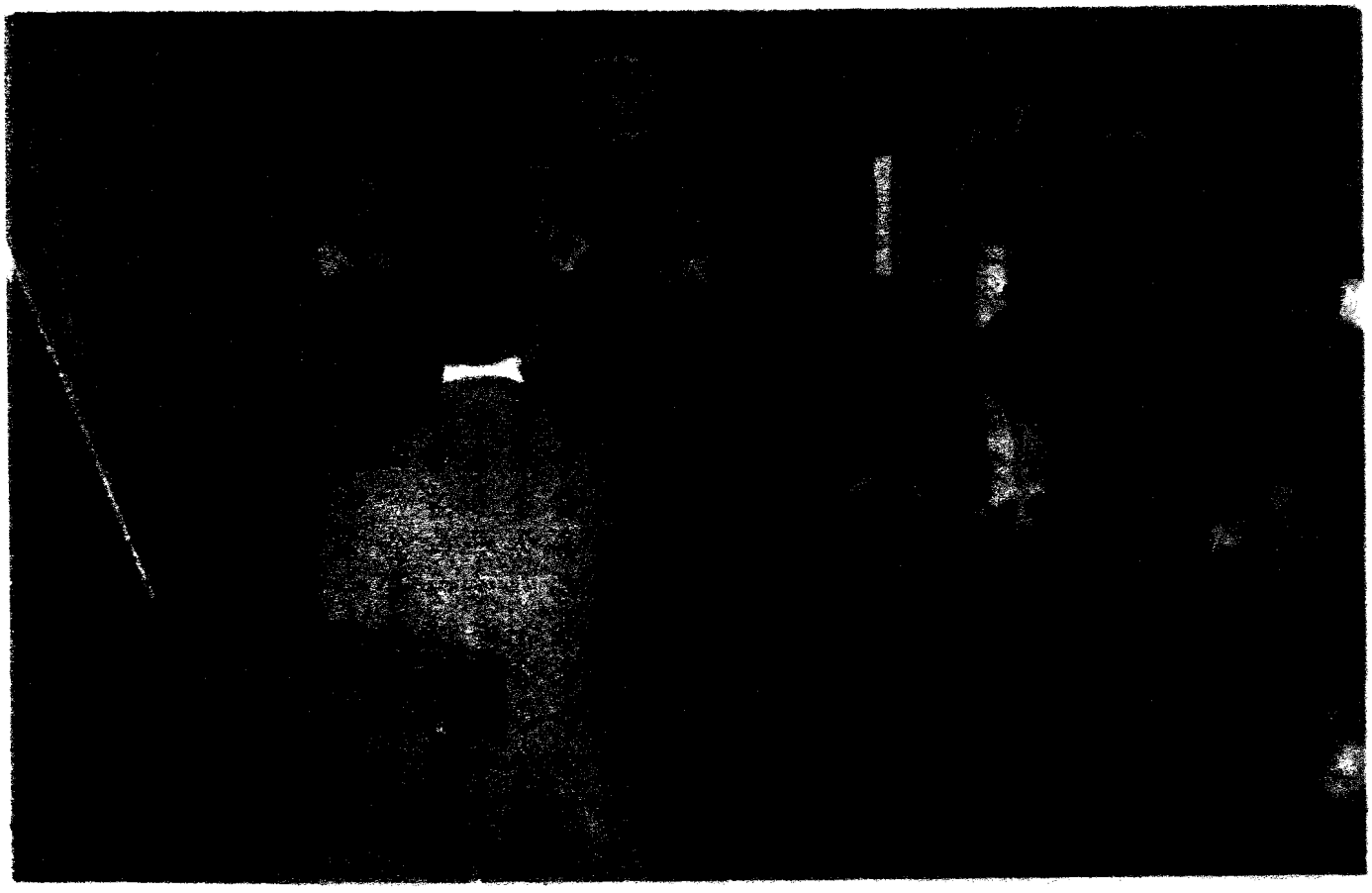
> This is the worst of trying to tell.... Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd!

2.2.5 Marlow Framed

Here, of course, Marlow is the narrator-protagonist, whose story is being exactly retold by the "frame narrator". Here I must digress a little to illustrate the point about the frame narrative. The metaphor is that of a framed picture; a picture representation of reality cut off from the real world by the frame, and meant for the seeing eye. But there may be variations and complications of such frames. I shall try to explain the concept in more concrete terms by drawing your attention to the picture here.

This is a photograph of an exhibit in Madam Tussaud's wax museum in London. The three ladies who are sitting for the portrait painting are wax figures of the Bronte sisters. You can see the back of the portrait painter, another wax figure, whose half-finished portrait is in the inner frame. Now look closely and see how many frames are there. One is the frame of the photograph framing the scene of some real-life spectators looking at the exhibit. The painting in the frame is supposedly drawn by the imitation artist; but the real artist is missing from the scene; he and the wax sculptor may have been two different artists. The framed portrait painting is thus an attributed one, with the actual artist having vanished from the scene. Had the picture been simply a painting of a painter painting, it would have been an exact equivalent of the classic frame narrative. But Conrad's complex frame narrative is rather more like the one you are looking at here. In *Heart of Darkness* in particular, the frame narrator introduces Marlow to the reader, the narratee. When Marlow takes over and starts spinning his yarn, the anonymous frame narrator becomes one of the narratees. But then Marlow himself retells other minor narrators' tales about Kurtz. And so on.

Frame within a frame



There are other differences as well. In the classic frame narrative, the frame narrator is often the most authoritative and knowledgeable of the narrators. But in *Heart of Darkness,* though the frame narrator passes on Marlow's story and appears to be reliable, he is Marlow's intellectual inferior, as is implied in Marlow's low opinion of and impatience with his audience. We can also see this in the beginning of the narrative, before he introduces Marlow. He describes the Thames, and England's past with undisguised adoration: "the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames...." He offers a catalogue of the English sea heroes. "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...." This is reminiscent of what I have told you about "Youth"; except in that here Marlow begins by speaking his anti-imperial meditation aloud: "And this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth...." Thus Conrad employs counter-discourses within the framework of the same narrative by subverting the traditional genre. The method is dialogic as well as dialectical. Marlow's remark exposes the relative naiveté and limited insight of the frame narrator, and alerts the reader as to the complexities that they might encounter in the point of view that is being presented. And the unreliability of any of the several narrators within the story's narrating frames.

2.3 NO BOYS' ADVENTURE

2.3.1 Action In Adventure

I have drawn your attention to the other convention that Conrad used—only to subvert it—when he took to *Maga*—that of the adventure story. Blackwood continued to publish the stories of a relatively unknown entity with the hope that one day he would with his kind of background produce significant (popular) adventure stories such as Stevenson's and Kipling's. Little did he realise that he was expecting what Conrad would not and could not give.

Action is central to an adventure story. In Conrad, the adventure story is predicated on inaction and lethargy. As Frederick Karl has pointed out, while we must "recognise how Conrad depended on certain conventions of the adventure story, we must stress his departure from melodrama and a debased romanticism. His reliance on passivity, inertness, immobility is one of his major achievements in reshaping the romantic sense of adventure." As a result, the focus of such tales as *Heart of Darkness* is never where the reader expects it to be. Further, action in his kind of "adventure stories" is always undermined by the manner of telling them. The narrator stops, comments, alerts the inner listeners of his yarn: the narrative gets halted and is even infinitely regressed. As Allan Ingram says:

> the action comes to seem almost incidental to the true point of the story, which is something or somewhere, between the self-consciousness of the narrator and the self-consciousness of Conrad himself, hiding behind walls of narration, behind the dislocation of time, denying, almost, that he has anything to do with the creation at all—losing himself, in other words, in the exercise of his craft.

Yet, Conrad would have Blackwood believe that his stories were action-oriented. Read the following extract from his letter to the editor. In its essence his work

> is action ... nothing but action—action observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to my sensations... action of human beings that will bleed to a prick, and are moving in a visible world.

Was he here trying to hoodwink the editor? Or, do you think, he was redefining the very concept of "action"? I think the answer to the question would have to be a complex one. Conrad's scepticism towards action must have sprung from, on the one hand, the lost cause of the Polish freedom fighters; on the other, the sham "civilising mission" of the African adventurers. So the adventure, if it can be so called, that he portrays is the

adventure inwards—the journey into the inner heart of darkness, and not the literal kind, as displayed in conventional adventure tales. As the character in one of Conrad's later tales says, "we are not living in a boy's adventure tale".

2.3.2 Action With A Difference

There are times when Marlow is on the verge of some action, but the nature of the problem he confronts is such, owing to its metaphysical nature, that no "action" on his part can redeem the situation for him. Hence his propensity for inaction and evasion. His dilemma is almost Hamletian in its unnaturalness. Hamlet, as you know, is the protagonist in shakespeare's play of the same name, whose words "To be or not to be" symbolise his perpetual dilemma. Action is suitable or possible only under normal, worldly circumstances. But not in the kind of situation he finds himself in. As he says at one such conjuncture:

> I fretted and fumed and took to arguing with myself whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz; but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what anyone knew or ignored? What did it matter who was manager? One gets sometimes such flashes of insight. The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond anyone's reach, and beyond my power of meddling.

This is not a special but typical situation for Marlow. Soon he takes to his more usual mental posture: that of meditation. He has now become Buddha-like. This is indeed no boys' adventure.

Marlow continues to play a passive role, preferring to meditate than act. He sees and hears. But his work begins when he is confronted by the wilderness. He starts by such apparently insignificant acts as taking off his boots, blowing the two-penny whistle, and throwing the dead body overboard. You will notice the suspenseful action typical of an adventure story when Marlow approaches Kurtz, and tries to rescue him. From now on he exercises a choice, even if it be a choice of nightmares. His final action is the telling of the lie to the Intended, more of which we shall have occasion to examine.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

Conrad's invention of Marlow then is indissolubly linked with his desire to accommodate his stylistic and ideological needs. This successful technique of distancing needs also to be seen in the broader context of modernist experiments. Technique is inseparable from ideology.

2.5 QUESTIONS

1. In the opening section of the story what differences and similarities do you notice in the points or view of Conrad, the frame narrator and Marlow?

2. What is meant or implied by the term "efficiency" in the context of imperialism?

3. Try to rewrite the opening section of the novel employing the conventional point of view of the omniscient narrator.

2.6 SUGGESTED READING

Frederick Jameson *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
Frederick Karl *Joseph Conrad:The Three Lives: A Biography*. New York : Farrar Straus, Giroux. 1979.
Ian Watt. *Conrad in the Ninteenth Century*. Berkley: University of California Press 1979.

UNIT 3 LITERARY ANALYSIS-II

Structure

3.0 Objectives
3.1 Introduction
3.2 An Approach to the Meaning
  3.2.1 Structure-wise
  3.2.2 Not Exactly A Story for Boys
3.3 Marlow : From His Point of View
  3.3.1 Is Marlow a Passive Receptacle of Experience?
  3.3.2 Marlow's Adventure : an Inner One
3.4 Delayed Decoding
3.5 Let Us Sum Up
3.6 Questions
3.7 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

You may have already got some idea about how tricky the task of reading *Heart of Darkness* is. The purpose in this unit is to clear some of the snags you might encounter while reading the text by suggesting some guidelines to approach it. We shall see, among other things, how it is a reworking of the genre of the adventure story. Marlow embarks on an adventurous journey all right, but does that mean that his journey therefore becomes an adventure? If yes, how is that different from the conventions of the genre? How does Marlow's character contribute to his way of telling the tale? Is it a psychological drama; not so much a journey in space and time as a spiritual descent into the heart of darkness, some kind of a Dantesque Inferno? (Dante (1265-1321), as you know is the Italian poet who wrote the allegorical epic *Divine Comedy).* As Marlow would say, "My purpose was to stroll the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno." In this unit, we shall take up these issues drawing mostly on textual evidence. So I shall expect you to pick up the references as we move along.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of the genre of the adventure story, and the more general consideration of Conrad's artistic intentions in the tale, it would be worthwhile to look at his well-known "artistic principle" laid down in the "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* part of which I quote at some length below. For this is an indispensable statement of his artistic principles, and stands as a touchstone for much of his writing career.

> A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each fundamental, what is enduring and essential—there one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal. Impressed by the aspect of the world the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into fact—whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living. They speak authoritatively to our common sense, to our intelligence, to our desire of peace, or to our desire of unrest; not seldom to our prejudices, sometimes to our fears, often to our egoism—but always to our credulity. And their words are heard with reverence, for their concern is with weighty matter:

with the cultivation of our minds and their proper care of our bodies, with the attainment of our ambitions, with the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims.

It is otherwise with the artist.

Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities—like the vulnerable body within a steel armour. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring—and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures for ever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependant on wisdom; to that in us which is gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring.

It was prescient of him to have anticipated the exact situation with regard to his work, particularly *Heart of Darkness*. Ideas have indeed been discarded, facts have been questioned, and theories have been demolished. Conrad's fortunes have changed. In the current theoretical climate, his appeals to the higher faculties, universal, transcendental values have lost their significance. There are no more any "universal categories"; or so we are told. In spite of such intellectual scepticism, our business as readers of a Conrad text will be to make sense of our own reading experience.

"Before the Congo I was a beast", Conrad was to say later. The effect of Congo remained with Conrad for many years. "An Outpost of Progress" was not a profound enough journey into the depths of darkness that Conrad had experienced in Congo. As he explores the dark recesses of his heart and mind via Marlow, we as readers are also conducted through the same route. Does Conrad the artist appeal "to that part of our being which is not dependant on wisdom; to that in us which is gift and not an acquisition—and, therefore, more permanently enduring?" Unfortunately our reading habits have changed, as I have just said. And our subject positions determine the effect of a text on us. We have learnt for example that an African, an Indian, a woman, a postcolonial subject will each read the text differently. Accordingly, it will mean different things to different people, not in the sense of its literal ambiguities, but also because of the subject positions of the readers. We shall take these up in separate sections.

3.2 AN APPROACH TO THE MEANINGS

3.2.1 Structure-wise

...So we have an adjectival and worse than superogatory insistence on 'unspeakable rites', 'unspeakable secrets', 'monstrous passions', 'inconceivable mystery', and so on.... Conrad... is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means.

(F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*. pp.198-9).

Leavis was one of the earliest and most influential critics of Conrad's method. Forster's complaints were no less influential, the most famous being this: "the secret casket of [Conrad's] genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel". With such authorities to contend with, it would be hard to defend the Conradian method; but I shall make a modest attempt at least to try to understand the method, if not defend it. In this effort I need your cooperation.

Let us first look at the bald structure first. Conrad breaks the story into three sections: In the first, Marlow travels from Europe to the Central Station; in the second, he travels

from the Central station to the Inner Station; and then, in the third, he returns to Europe. The plot, similarly, is a straightforward one; ostensibly following the convention of the tale within the tale, where a story is told by a British gentleman to other gentlemen.

In spite of this simple structure, there are many levels to *Heart of Darkness,* some of which – especially those dealing with symbolism – are complex. In what follows, I have collected some important topics, considerations, or questions. If you try, you can reach these levels in your own way. The suggestions below are designed to alert you to the richness of the story and its complexities.

In the beginning, there is a mention of "the fascination of the abomination". What does this mean? Try to find its significance in the later development of the story [I].

> Marlow talks about "breath[ing] dead hippo, so to speak, and not to be contaminated" [II]
> Why does Kurtz say "The horror! The horror!" ? [III]
> Why does Marlow lie to Kurtz's Intended about Kurtz's last words? Does he lie at all? [III]
> What does Marlow actually *do* in the story as an adventurer?

To be able to tackle these issues let us see what happens in the text. The episodes on board the yacht are minor no doubt, but the frame narrator introduces Marlow and the events which he would describe by drawing parallels between their present situation and what is to follow. Even Marlow does the same, though their respective "points of view" are different: on what an adventure or exploration is; what amounts to heroism, and the ethics of empire-building. Since their views are presented with cutting irony, it would be interesting to see where the author is chuckling; or to quote Joyce, where the "artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). Do you feel the same way about Marlow?

Among the many contrasts that we go on encountering, is the obvious one between the simple situation and "predicament" that the listeners aboard the 'Nellie' find themselves in, and those complications which Marlow is to enumerate. These latter, he goes on to stress repeatedly, are "unspeakable". He expresses his frustrations in trying to recall his strange experiences. He begins by saying that he is not going to "bother" his listeners much "with what happened to [him] personally". Yet when he goes on to enumerate what he was going to tell, he uses variations of the personal pronoun **eight** times. Similarly, the frame narrator, showing a remarkable, and perhaps uncharacteristic, acumen in his understanding of Marlow's character, warns us about the complexities of Marlow's tale:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), *and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.*

I have italicised some lines here, which you must keep in mind; and ask yourself whether Conrad is himself not giving us a clue as to what and what not to expect of *his* narrative, and how to approach its meaning(s). To my mind the kernel of the meaning lies in the middle in a realistic tale, whereas in a tale in the symbolist-impressionistic mode the meaning envelops the tale. Here, then, perhaps one can see Conrad himself sounding a warning signal to the contemporary readers not to expect the realistic kind of fiction that they were wont to expect. This is the frame narrator's "Preface" to Marlow's tale, not dissimilar to Conrad's "Preface" to *The Nigger*. Marlow himself was also worried about epistemological issues: "When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily."

3.2.2 Not Exactly A Story for Boys

Let us now look at how Conrad uses the narrative convention as well as the popularity of the adventure story. He had earlier used the latter mode in 'Youth', which Sir Arthur Quiller Couch had called "after all... a story for boys...." In *Heart of Darkness* similarly, he introduces the voyage situation to raise expectations of an adventure. He uses an elaborate pattern of voyages, weaving the reader back and forth in time: the voyages of the Romans to Britain; the voyages of Marlow, Kurtz, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and the other pilgrims to the Congo (never named, only suggested, in the tale); and Marlow's two visits to the "whited sepulchre" after and before his Congo experience. The central voyage in this labyrinth of voyages is Marlow's visit to the "Inner Station". As it turns out, it becomes a quest for Kurtz, who then himself grows into an enigma to be unravelled. The quest for the real Kurtz thus replaces the original adventure: the blank space of the geography book; and thus would increasingly come to symbolise the quest for truth. So by the end of Part I, Marlow says: "I wasn't very interested in him. No. Still, I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there." This is how Part I ends. But by the middle of Part II, he would imagine their beetle-like steamer "crawl[ing] towards Kurtz—exclusively".

3.3 APPROACHES TO THE MEANING

3.3.1 Is Marlow A Passive Receptacle of Experience?

I have drawn your attention to the view expressed by some critics that Conrad, even while appropriating the genre of the adventure story, was subverting it. Instead of using action, as it was commonly understood, and which was such an important component of any adventure, he relied on just the opposite: inaction, and passivity. We have also discussed how various layers of voyages are submerged into the narrative framework. Of these, the chief voyage, of course, is Marlow's into the very heart of darkness. Marlow begins his tale by remarking that he was tired of the usual kind of Eastern voyages, and then of resting. But before this, the frame narrator tells us that Marlow was an untypical seaman: "The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them— the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same." What, then, are we to accept? What the frame narrator tells us about Marlow, or what the latter tells the former about himself? What Marlow reports about his own "action" would suggest, and perhaps confirm the first impression, that the frame narrator was naive in comparison with him. For much later, Marlow would tell his audience (one of whom is the frame narrator himself) that "She [the steamer] had given me a chance to come out a bit—to find out what I could do." But suddenly realising that he might raise our (the nineteenth century reader's) false expectations about his being a romantic adventurer, he tells us : "No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work." Thus evasion of action, rather than action, is what we are drawn to see again and again.

Virginia Woolf also draws the same kind of inference about Marlow:

> Marlow was one of those born observers who are happiest in retirement. Marlow liked nothing better than to sit on deck, in some obscure creek of the Thames, smoking and recollecting; smoking and speculating; sending his smoke beautiful after rings of words until all the summer's night became a little clouded with tobacco smoke.

But his physical inertia does not prevent him from leading a vigorous intellectual life. It is not surprising, then, that the Marlow who tells the story is a wiser man, having come back from the depths of his Congo experience. Hence the constant reference to him as the

Buddha, the "enlightened one", the literal meaning of the word. Though Viriginia Woolf does not go as far as saying this yet she recognises the streak of the philosopher in Marlow:

> Marlow, too, had a profound respect for the men with whom he had sailed; but he saw the humour of them. He nosed out and described in masterly fashion those livid creatures who pray successfully upon the clumsy veterans. He had a flair for human deformity; his humour was sardonic. Nor did Marlow live entirely wreathed in the smoke of his own cigars.

So Marlow talks about what work means for him, soon after admitting his reluctance to do any work. "I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means." After worrying himself about the rivets, he says: "Hang!—and let things slide. I had plenty of time for meditation." Accordingly his manner of reporting the incident is different from that of the other seamen: "For the rest, his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing...." says the frame narrator, thus showing a rare insight into Marlow's character.

3.3.2 Marlow's Adventure Then Is An Inner One

Once Conrad said about the artist: "In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds. Who, then, is going to say, 'Nay' to his temptations if not his conscience?" Marlow, not unlike his author, has turned into a conscientious story-teller after years of sea adventures, with himself as a seer and experientialist rather than an adventurer. He too is worried about being as true to his experience as possible. Hence his occasional frustration in trying to tell: "This is the worst of trying to tell ...." For he was trying to tell, not what was happening outside himself, but of his own psychological adventure. He begins, for example, by saying that he did not want to bother his listeners with what happened to him personally. But then he goes on to declare in the same breath:

> ...yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.

The deliberate use, and repetition of the term "a kind of light", in contrast to the darkness of the title, and the repeated invocation of it, is significant. Light and darkness, black and white operate as complex symbolic pairing, of manichean implication, but more often than not as truth and the lack of it.

3.4 DELAYED DECODING

One of the reasons why the technique employed in it has impeded our understanding of *Heart of Darkness* is that he does not reveal the protagonist-narrator's immediate understanding of what he sees or hears. The narrator finds it difficult to make sense of his experience immediately; and Conrad's impressionistic technique allows for such gradual unravelling of the truth of his experience. Conrad says in his famous Preface that his task was "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all to make you *see*. That—and no more, is everything." Now take the case of Marlow. Like his author, he perceives the difficulties of a story-teller, who is trying to tell an incredible tale: "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone...." Exasperated with the difficulty of his task he asks his audience: "Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" He admits that what he had seen was much less than what his listeners are

able to see now. But he must try and exactly convey his own sense impressions to his audience: so he follows the same route which he had taken while experiencing the sequence of events, the sequence of impressions on his brooding/meditating mind. Accordingly we notice that none of his understandings are conveyed immediately; and we have to wait for another dimension to unveil. This is perhaps what Ian Watt has so aptly called "Delayed Decoding". Says he: the author through this method attempts "to prevent a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later.... This takes directly into the observer's consciousness at the very moment of the perception, before it has been translated into its cause." This is a technique whereby effects precede causes. Conrad had tried this method even earlier; but it is with *Heart of Darkness* that he perfects the technique. Two examples would suffice to illustrate the point.

Do you remember some details of Marlow's approach to Kurtz's station? If you do, you would recall how they suddenly encounter a snag. The snag is both literal and metaphorical. Instead of saying directly that their steamboat was being shot at, he expresses his irritation at the way his poleman and fireman were behaving: "I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without taking the trouble to haul the pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed." Gradually he notices "the little sticks". Then he stops talking about all this, and starts talking about clearing the snag. And then exclaims suddenly: "Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!" What is happening here is that the listeners as well as the readers are experiencing the same sequence: "And before all to make you *see*".

The second exhibit is a case even of more delayed decoding. This is about the sighting of Kurtz's station towards the end of Part II. The jungle and the woods provided the background for the decayed building. "There was", Marlow saw through the glasses (telescope), "no enclosure or fence of any kind; but there had been one apparently, for near the house half-a-dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls...." Just as Marlow did not know then what this "ornamentation" was, neither his audience then nor the reader now knows what the significance of this apparently insignificant detail is. Since Marlow had to wait, he makes us wait too; but not for the sake of making us wait. The timing of the disclosure is important. After considerable time lapse (for the listeners on the yacht) and several pages (for the reader), Marlow reminds them all:

> You remember I told you I had been struck [we do remember, but he never told us that he was really "struck"] at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at any event for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole.

I am sure you will be able to appreciate the virtues of this method; by which the text does not always progress, it is regressive too and memory which drives Conrad, and Marlow, drives us too, and to a better understanding of the experience that is being relayed back to us. The complexity does not end there. When Marlow talks about the symbolism of the poles, Conrad too seems to be consciously making us see further symbolism in the poles. The heads are food for the vultures, the likes of Leopold, and the imperialist forces all of whom are represented in the lone figure of Kurtz. The ants are the smaller fries who are crawling around him: the accountants, the managers, the brick-maker, all profiting at the expense of the natives. Kurtz had meant the heads to symbolise something else: as warning signals, scarecrows of some sort for the natives, a warning not, revolt. If they do, he would "exterminate the brutes".

The longest and interminable, unfinished decoding is that of the character of Kurtz himself. And we have seen and shall continue to analyse how this happens. I just want to tell you at this point that all the delayed decodings suggest how we ought to look at Kurtz, and why Marlow does not present an unambiguous portrayal of his character.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

So much depends, then, on our understanding of Conrad's handling of Marlow. But that is just the beginning of the process of grasping the meaning. The important thing is to re-enact Marlow's manner: surrender your consciousness to the sense-experiences that are being heaped on us, try to see and hear. Then analyse the experience with the data in hand. The trick is not to accept everything on face value. Do not proceed in a linear fashion, travel backward even while moving forward. See how your past reading experience is enriched by what you get to read subsequently in Marlow's narrative. That is his way.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. On what aspects of narration does Conrad lay stress? Cite examples from the text to substantiate your answer.

2. What adventure stories have you read? Have you read any by Stevenson and Wells? In what way does Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* resemble or differ from those?

3. How does Conrad create "atmosphere" and "mood"? Do you see traces of the symbolist and impressionist devices in his style and technique?

3.7 SUGGESTED READING

F.R Leavis. *The Great Tradition*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1948, rpt 1963.
Allan Ingram. *Joseph Conrad: Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow Line*, London: Methuen, 1986.

UNIT 4 RACE, EMPIRE, GENDER IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Structure

4.0 Objectives
4.1 Introduction
4.2 Kipling's Squint
4.3 Race
  4.3.1 The Europeans
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4.4 Gender
  4.4.1 The Women (White)
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary aim in this unit is to analyse some characters in the novella keeping in view the main issues of race, gender and empire. For Conrad questions of race are inextricable from those of empire. Since the novelist uses characters and puts them in situations to reveal their and his own way of looking at reality, we can now begin looking at some of the characters.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

From the discussion in the previous units, it may have become clear to you how Conrad was wary of exposing himself too much for fear of being rejected by a majority of his English readers. You have also noticed how cleverly and ironically he used many of the conventional ideas and techniques, giving the impression to the undiscerning contemporary public of being a conformist. Little did they suspect that Conrad was subverting the basic literary and political assumptions of his times. This subtle strategy may have prompted some early critics of *Heart of Darkness* to accept the work as complicit. "It must not be supposed that Mr. Conrad makes attack upon colonisation, expansion, even upon Imperialism" said a contemporary reviewer. But Edward Garnett, having been a close associate of Conrad's, was one of the earliest critics to recognise the subversive nature of the Conrad text: He called it "a page torn from the life of the Dark Continent—a page which has been hitherto carefully blurred and kept away from European eyes".

This kind of difference of opinion on the political implications of *Heart of Darkness* in the general context of Conrad's politics remains divided to this day. For example, some postcolonial critics think that Conrad was a racist, and supported the empire. "Conrad is a bloody racist", Chinua Achebe, would say in 1977 in the *Massachusetts Review,* though he was later to tone down his attack somewhat. On the other hand, another writer from the same continent, Ezekiel Mphahlele would declare that Conrad was one of the few "outstanding white novelists who portray competently characters belonging to cultural groups outside their own" (*The African Image*, p. 125).

If I were to single out one factor which accounts for such discrepancy, I would point to the portrayal of the character of Kurtz. Ascertaining Conrad's attitude towards imperialism will be guided to a great extent by the reader's understanding of Kurtz's

character. Similarly, since Marlow uses racist language and also makes snide remarks about women in the novella, the reader's understanding of Conrad's attitude to the questions of race and gender also gets affected by how they look at the Conrad-Marlow relationship. That he was conscious about the racial question becomes evident from what he once wrote to a French correspondent—that *Heart of Darkness* was, among other things, a study of racial difference (*Letters*). For him the two issues of race and empire were interrelated.

4.2 KIPLING'S SQUINT

From your study of some other political fictions, you may have formed some idea about what constituted the standard English attitudes towards the Empire. You of course know that none was more representative than Kipling's notion of the white man's burden, his imperialistic rhetoric and exhortation. The most famous of Kiplingesque bombast is his poem on "The White Man's Burden", beginning:

> Take up the White Man's burden
> Send forth the best ye breed
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need....

This was published the same year as Conrad's novella, that is, in 1899. The "Exiles' Line" with its references to the "chain gangs" also sings of the "wheel of Empire" (empire in upper case).

It is safe to assume that Conrad was familiar with all these. But for tactical reasons he would seldom come out in the open in English papers; not even in his letters to friends unless through oblique references. He made a casually contorted reference to "the folly of nations", or to Kipling's "squint", in the context of the Boer war in South Africa. But the farthest he could go on the subject was in a letter to Graham Cunningham :

> The whole business is inexpressibly stupid—even on general principles: for, evidently a war should be a conclusive proceeding, this noble enterprise (no matter what its first result) must be the beginning of an endless contest. It is always unwise to begin war, which, to be effective, must be a war of extermination: it is positively imbecile to start it without a clear notion of what it means and to force on questions for immediate solution which are eminently fit to be left to time.... There is an appalling fatuity in this business. If I am to believe in Kipling this is a war undertaken for the cause of democracy.... However, now the fun has commenced, I trust British successes will be crushing from the first ,— on the same principle that if there's murder being done in the next room and you cant stop it, you wish the head of the victim to be bashed in forthwith and the whole thing over for the sake of your feelings.

The cutting irony here is obviously whetted by a kind of subterranean anger. Once the intention is wrong the method is not important. Like Marlow, who would retort to the station manager's complaint against Kurtz's method, Conrad's answer to the European enterprise in Africa would have been: "No method at all". So it is not as if Conrad here in the letter is supportive of the British method of committing murder.

4.3 RACE

4.3.1 The Europeans

Fresleven:

Do you remember this man? It would not surprise me at all if your answer is no, lost as you may have been in the maze of Marlow's narrative. Yet he is integral to the foregrounding that Conrad so consciously provides in the beginning. Let us examine briefly his role in the narrative.

Conrad takes care to specify Fresleven's race and nationality, and of course his gender (only males can serve the empire in practical terms; but we must return to this point in a later section on gender). This Dane is dead even before Marlow's central narrative begins. As a matter of fact, it is his death which provides Marlow with the opportunity of fulfilling his childhood dream. This dream however which turns into a nightmare towards the end of his narrative, where he talks about the choice of nightmares, is another, though not unrelated, matter. Fresleven, yet another European, supposedly superior, another agent of the imperial forces, dies under the silliest of circumstances: a fight over two black hens—not unlike the quarrel over the sugar between Kayerts and Carlier in "An Outpost of Progress". The black and white symbolism in the novella, apart from its usual manichean purpose, is crucial to our understanding of the racial difference Conrad speaks of. He deliberately uses the racist language of the day; anything else would have been unnatural for the Englishman, Marlow. Do the two black hens stand for black women? Perhaps not. Conrad's irony in that case loses force. A member of the superior race, a civilizer of the savages could pick up a quarrel and batter the chief of the village; and he was "the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs". He went out of his head because he was out there for two years "in the noble cause". Finally the blacks kill him.

Since we live in the postmodernist times when brackets, hyphens, and quotes are part of our linguistic weaponry, we feel tempted to put the phrase "noble cause" within quotes. Conrad is subtler; he expects the irony to work on its own. Marlow, now the wise narrator tells us that "I should think the cause of progress got [the hens], anyhow". Don't you think that at this stage the hens assume greater significance than their status as mere fowls? The implication seems to be that the "cause of progress" smells "foul".

Conrad portrays quite a few representatives from diverse European nationalities, all of whom contribute to the civilising mission. The accountant has no accounts to keep; the station manager has hardly anything to do except for gossiping. The doctor glorifies the company, sends out people by examining them and clearing them; he also carries out observations in the interest of science (he too is an apostle of progress albeit of science). But he himself is clever enough not to keep out of the actual business. There was no "madness in his family".

4.3.2 Marlow Again And Kurtz

You have already been given some idea about Marlow, the persona/mask of Conrad's. As we have seen, he embarks on the journey to the dark corner after a period of stasis. He has had what he calls "a regular dose of the east". He seems to have been influenced by his sojourn there, as is evident from his reference to being charmed by the snake (a reversal of the Indian cultural code: snake-charming). We are also constantly reminded of his Buddha-like posture and propensity to meditate. Next, we are told about his childhood passion for maps, and how his original intention was to go to the great river: "I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook." He would soon, when on the journey, talk about "the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder". This fascination is perhaps what he had already referred to as the "fascination of the abomination" that every explorer has. That the symbolism points inevitably towards a Dantesque hell, towards sin and evil there is no doubt, with numerous references to hell, snake, Mephistopheles, the

forked beard, flies to suggest that Beelzebub was around, darkness, bottom, below etc. (Mephistopheles and Beelzebub are the names of the chief devils). Kurtz, when he is introduced, is said to be out there: "the very *bottom* of there" (my italics). He is the prince of darkness. There seems to be in the title an allusion to the Miltonic phrase, "darkness visible". And Marlow's journey into the dark place of the earth inevitably leads him towards Kurtz, even though he is initially reluctant to admit it. By the end of Part I he says: "I had plenty of time for meditation, and now and then I would give some thought to Kurtz. I wasn't very interested in him. No". But then he adds: "Still I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, could climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there". Later he would say, "we crept on, towards Kurtz". Again, "Sometimes I would pick out a tree a little way ahead to measure our progress towards Kurtz...." again, he says "For me it crawled towards Kurtz—exclusively". In the third part, Marlow is obsessed with Kurtz, though he continues to say that "Mr Kurtz was no idol of mine". For most of his narrative from now on is focused on him. After all, as he had said earlier, he was the man "who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time". In spite of his inexplicable attraction towards Kurtz, Kurtz is what Marlow just falls short of becoming. Recall how Marlow boasts that he doesn't tell a lie; and yet, tells more than the biggest lie of all to the Intended. Similarly, the frame narrator says about Marlow even as Marlow "no more to us than a voice" says the same thing about Kurtz. But his stopping short, holding back is symbolically represented by his act of throwing away his predecessor's blood-soaked shoes.

To me Kurtz is a familiar compound ghost: he is an amalgam of Livingstone, Stanley ("he had discovered lots of villages, a lake too", we are told), Klein, Leopold II (a politician), Conrad, but most of all Kipling (eloquence). I arrive at the conclusion by looking at all the attributes conferred on Kurtz by various characters. Can you make a list?

"Kurtz" is Russian for "short", whereas Kurtz was tall, "looked at least seven feet long". Mark how Conrad describes him here; one does not say "long" for a man, but for an animal such as a snake. He is prostrate. So he is seven feet *long* not tall. Secondly, Marlow says "Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life—and death". Thus, his physique too gave the lie to him. This discrepancy between appearance and reality would receive its ironical echo in the words of the Intended about Kurtz: "He died as he lived". Only Marlow and his listeners know how right and wrong she was. Kurtz's life was a sham, a hypocritical mask. But his death completely unmasked him. She was also right because Kurtz relived the life of deceit and hypocrisy, "desire, temptation, and surrender" "during that supreme moment of complete knowledge".

4.3.3 The Natives

> (1) Feel considerably in doubt about the future. Think just now that my life amongst the people (white) around here cannot be very comfortable. Intend avoid acquaintance as much as possible.
>
> (2) Prominent characteristic of the social life here: people speaking ill of each other.
>
> Conrad, Entries in the Congo Diary

Achebe asserted that "Heart of Darkness" depicts Africa as a "place of negations....in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will manifest." The Africans, according to her, are degraded and dehumanised, and are represented either as a howling or wailing mob or as grotesques. They are denied speech, or are granted speech only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. Africa is presented as a "setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his own peril." Does your reading of the book tally with this view?

I think the crucial portions of the text in this regard are those where the chain gang, and the other Africans are presented as "criminals", "enemies", "workers", and finally

"rebels". There were also the "cannibals". Marlow wonders why the latter did not eat the white men. "Restraint" is the answer. They had restraint, whereas Kurtz and the other whites had none. This is the crucial difference, Marlow thinks. Also note the difference in Conrad's portrayal of the Europeans and their treatment of the Africans. It is significant that Marlow, while narrating how he got the job uses a cliché: "I stepped into [Fresleven's] shoes". He doesn't take them off until much later in the narrative. Like Marlow who often withholds information, or realises the significance of what exactly he sees or hears, Conrad expects us to make connections between distant incidents. From being a mere metaphor at this stage, the shoes become symbols when they get soaked in blood, the blood of "imperial mission." Stepping into the shoes of his predecessor would perhaps mean what Marlow repeats from time to time, namely, that he too becomes albeit unwittingly drawn into the mission. This "poor predecessor" of his, we are told later, had educated the native helmsman in Marlow's steamer, which was crawling towards Kurtz. When he dies from a spear wound (a consequence of being a willing agent of the mission) "My shoes were full"; of what Marlow does not say; but leaves little to our imagination. They are full of blood. "To tell you the truth I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks." Then he says, "I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to...." The evasive technique is used to a striking effect. What he is "looking forward to", is a meeting with Kurtz. But the first impression sticks. Through their manner of juxtaposition, the shoes and Kurtz become indistinguishable. Kurtz's hands too are bloodied. Marlow feels suddenly guilty of complicity. Any doubt we might still have about Conrad's tropes at this juncture is removed when the same identification is repeated through deliberate ambiguity. When the second shoe vanishes into the water, Marlow exclaims: "By Jove! It's all over....he has vanished—the gift has vanished, by means of a spear, arrow, or club...." But the shoes become shoes again through Conrad's own brand of defamiliarisation. "My dear boys, what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of new shoes!"

The other crucial point where Conrad seems to be passing an ironic stricture on the civilising work occurs when he describes the chain gang and the "shadows". Kipling is easily identified as one of the targets. It is true that Conrad describes the natives as subhuman, as Achebe complains; but the white imperialists are treated as inhuman, to say the least. As Marlow goes on to build a contrast between the civilisation he was coming from and the place of his sojourn he says that the earth was unearthly; and is about to say that the men were inhuman. But he stops short, and says, proleptically as usual: "...and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman". Then he says even more with one of the rare redeeming moments of sensitivity verging on the sentimental: "They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar". Now we can't be too sure about the latter part of his assertion. It is much later that we realise the contrast between the humanity of these "savages", and the inhumanity of the "civilised people".

After the description of the natives as shadows, even animals (because of the way in which the work of progress is being carried out), Marlow meets a white man: "I shook hands with this miracle"; and he says he mistook him to be a sort of vision. But soon he would think "his appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy". As part of the mission, no doubt, Marlow reports ironically, the dummy had been " 'teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.' Thus this man had verily accomplished something. And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order". The implied sexual perversions of Kurtz are thus foreshadowed in this man's "teaching". In the name of educating her, what he had done was to "keep" her and exploit her by getting his work done. For his answer was to Marlow's question as to how he could dress so immaculately.

4.4 GENDER

4.4.1 The Women (White)

If Achebe saw the Africans as marginalized and demeaningly stereotyped, various feminist critics felt that the tale similarly belittled women. Nina Pelikan Straus, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith, and Elaine Showalter are among those who claimed that *Heart of Darkness* was not only imperialist but also "sexist". Straus declared that male critics had repeatedly become accomplices of Marlow, who "brings truth to men by virtue of his bringing falsehood to women". We will take up these objections and look at the scenes involving women; but first some general remarks. Meanwhile, it would be useful if you make a roster of women characters and the role they play in the tale.

The usual feminist objection to adventure stories is that adventures and voyages are the domain of men, for men and by men. Stories of empire, are not free from similar charges. In Forster's *A Passage to India* too, the refrain goes, women are not so much active participants in the upkeep of the empire but are fringe, decorative figures. Mrs. Moore wants to know the real India; Adela is here as the fiancée of Ronny Heaslop. In Conrad too, the empire is the upkeep of tough men; and empire is an on-the-spot job. But the first thing that occurs to me about the Conrad narrative we are presently dealing with, is that here women also are made a party to the imperial enterprise. Undoubtedly, in the primeval, Darwinian world only the fittest survive. And who are the "fittest"? We notice, from beginning to the end, one after the other the rapacious seekers of fortune either lose their heads or die, or kill each other. This happens in the earlier tale too "An Outpost of Progress". This has a historical basis in the patriarchal western world. But Conrad does not necessarily subscribe to the view. Women, for him, are not culpable. They are not only not mere tools in the hands of men; they have influence over men. Marlow, apparently sexist, nonetheless has to depend on an influential woman relative: "Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job". But by now we have learnt how Conrad keeps his distance from Marlow, only occasionally do their voices merge.

Conrad, however, seems to be playing to the gallery occasionally with his casual, sham-casual, flippant remarks on women. After all his contemporary readership expected boys'/men's adventures. At the same time women, if present, were there only to heighten the romance. He had written to his publisher: "It is a story of the Congo. There is no love in it and no woman—only incidentally." Let us read a passage from the text alongside this, and try to see if any connection can be established.

> They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and can never be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.

He returns to the subject much later in the tale when he accidentally let slip the word "girl". "Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it." But then he would devote the last part of the story to a woman, to which we shall come presently. Even when he goes for the interview for the job he encounters two women, who are knitting black wool. The symbolism here is not quite obvious; we might think that they are Dame Fortune. The old lady "seemed uncanny and fateful....Old knitter of black wool." Marlow cannot forget them. Men are playthings in their hands. They have uncanny power over them.

The other woman in the tale is an oil painting by Kurtz himself that Marlow had seen at the Central Station. This woman was reminiscent of Marlow's dialogue with his aunt, about the workers being the emissary of light. For the woman was "draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch".

4.4.2 The Women (African)

How are the African women portrayed in the tale? What kind of impact did the emissaries of light make on them? How does Conrad look at the "work" through Marlow? If you discount the metaphorical reading of the two black hens, the native women of Africa are first represented through the woman who was "taught" by the accountant. "It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work". The most imposing figure among these is of course the woman who was close to Kurtz in the Inner Station. The "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman", who "walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes, treading the earth proudly...." What does she stand for? She was one of the adorers of Kurtz, who did not want him to be taken away. She was as faithful to Kurtz as the Intended was. She is described by Marlow in very ambiguous terms. She is both "barbarous" and "superb"; "savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent—

Do you think Conrad meant to project/delineate her as a "character", in the way characters are realistically portrayed? To my mind, she is more a symbolic figure; and it would be somehow wrong to take her as a partial depiction of "the savage woman". She is a symbol; a counterpoint to the white women or the Intended. If the likes of Kurtz are the emissaries of "progress" she is a grotesque manifestation of that progress. I feel that Conrad meant us to catch the pun on the clause: "[T]here was something ominous and stately in her deliberate *progress*" (my emphasis). More explicitly she is described as "the image of [the wilderness's] own tenebrous and passionate soul". A less favourable but not less plausible reading might be to see her as evil incarnate. This will mean that it was by her that Kurtz was swallowed up; and distanced from her, he can realise the horror of the wilderness. She would then become a symbol of metaphysical evil that the dark continent held: its ivory, its fatal attraction. Not that Africa was inherently evil. But it is that aspect of Africa which lured the rapacious European in the name of progress into the depths of evil. No wonder this woman had the "value of several elephant tusks upon her." Yet there is something deeply ambiguous about her, something that cannot be simply described as plain or metaphysical evil. She is Africa to whom "civilisation" has done grievous wrong; hence her tragic and angry aspect: "She came abreast of the steamer, stood still, and faced us. Her long shadow fell to the water edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose." When her dying God is being carried away, "She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose." Later, in their final separation, "she put out her hands...." Marlow would remember this sight, during his meeting with the Intended. She would reappear as "a tragic and familiar Shade [the Intended]" with the same posture, "bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms...." Thus in the novella the distinction between black and white is not one of pigmentation. As Eloise Knapp Hay has reminded us, for Conrad, "'race' meant 'nation' more than 'pigmentation'". It will be this dark victim of Imperialism who will strike back at the empire in the form of writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

4.4.3 The Woman (The Intended)

Once Conrad wrote to a correspondent about the importance of the last pages of the novella, "where the interview of the man and the girl locks in...the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa." In fact, the story is on another plane more than an indictment of European imperialism in Africa. I think what Conrad explores through Marlow's explorations of Africa and through Kurtz, are the depths of metaphysical evil of which it is impossible to speak in plain language. Had his intentions been merely political and not the very psychology of evil, he would have been satisfied with what he had done in "An Outpost of Progress". This is perhaps what he meant when he said that the subject of *Heart of Darkness*, though of his times, was not "topically treated". The tale, he further

said, was "less concentrated upon individuals". So there is really no point in complaining about the characters in the story being partial, incomplete or this "-ist" or that "-ist".

So it is significant, but not, to my mind at least, a sign of Conrad's attempt to marginalise women, that the Intended has no name, like most other characters in the tale.

We notice Kurtz referring to her as a possession: she is clubbed along with some material possessions "my ivory", "my station", "my Intended", "my career" .... "Everything belonged to him". When Kurtz dies, Marlow goes looking for her. The reasons he cites are two. **One** is curiosity, the **other** is his desire to "give [his memory and his Intended] up, too, to the past". But no sooner had he mentioned the girl than he would say, "Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse." This seems to be by far the most controversial judgement on women; and feminists have thirsted for Conrad's blood on account of this "incriminating evidence". But if we remind ourselves of a comment of Marlow in another tale, *Chance*, we shall simply be flabbergasted. For he says there that women see "the whole truth", whereas men live in a "fool's paradise". As for Conrad himself, he would write to the then British Prime Minister advocating voting rights for women. So much for his misogyny!

The figure of another woman hovers briefly, and inconspicuously in Marlow's tale, that of Kurtz's mother, though only at her death. She is reported to have been watched over by the Intended. What do you make of this minor detail?

Marlow, does not accept the view that Kurtz's experience in the Congo, that is, that which is believed to have been his experience by his worldly-wise employers, will be of any use to Europe's future action. Yet since he is partially swathed by its "shadow" he would carry it with him. The memory of Kurtz himself is now a living shadow: "He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities ['the horror! The horror']; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence." It is this vision that he carries into the lady's house. It is this pall that covers the white lady, her house, everything into darkness. Into the lady's house with him goes the sound of savage drums, like the heartbeats "of a conquering darkness." In spite of the darkness, the wilderness is vibrantly alive and throbbing, while in her "radiance," the lady inhabits a "sarcophagus [a decorative, marble tomb]". She is a "familiar shade," recalling Dido in Virgil's underworld (In his epic poem Aeneid, the Roman poet Virgil recounts how Dido the queen of Carthage killed herself when abandoned by Aeneas). And it is her Europe that is the underworld. Marlow's interview with Kurtz's Intended, like everything in the story, verges on the allegorical, but the profound suggestiveness is the culmination of Conrad's symbolist method. In his description of the meeting, for the first time after the opening paragraphs, Marlow collapses the time frames. It is only now that we realise why Marlow could think of two thousand years ago as yesterday. "I saw her and him in the same instant of time—his death and her sorrow—I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death" though it "was more than a year since the news came". The simultaneity of his two experiences is emphasised in the way he says he hears her say, "I have survived", which is indistinguishable from Marlow's last cry of metaphysical anguish. Thus the woman is carried to another plane. She is a living picture of Kurtz's painting. In the painting the background was sombre; the lady was blindfolded. Here too Marlow discerns the enveloping darkness in spite of the white marble. Her ignorance is monumental. She cannot see the reality of Kurtz; his hollowness. It is for this reason that every word she says about Kurtz is true, but only in their deeper ironies. She is one more European who has "constructed" Kurtz. But in the end, the woman becomes a tool in the hands of Conrad to wrap up the significance of Marlow's experience. The torch of the civilising mission continues to be passed on from generation to generation. She stands for "us", Europe, and "the world". This seems to be the meaning of her regret: Kurtz' death is a loss "to me" "to us", and, finally, "to the world". By giving her a name Conrad would have found it difficult to make her such a rich symbolic figure.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

Thus what we have just seen is that like most modernist texts *Heart of Darkness* anticipates our objections and resists reductive analyses. This is not to say that Conrad is politically correct. He could not have escaped the prejudices of his times in matters of ideology; but he was certainly breaking new ground, offering acute critiques of political discourse and adventurism. We know of some policy makers who were influenced by Conrad's views on the Congo.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term ideology? Have you read any marxist literary critics? How is Jameson's criticism of Conrad's politics relevant to *Heart of Darkness*?
2. Conrad thinks, by implication, at least or what he says, that empire and race are inseparable categories? Would you agree with reference to your reading of *Heart of Darkness*?
3. What is Marlow's ideological position?

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Elaine Showalter *Sexual Anarchy*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.
Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa" (Lecture), *The Chanceller Lecture Series,* 1074-75, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1976.
Terry Eagleton. *Criticism and Ideology*. London: New Left Books, 1976.
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UNIT 5 THE LENGTHENING SHADOW

Structure

5.0 Objectives
5.1 Introduction
5.2 Ambiguities and Ambivalence
  5.2.1 Title
  5.2.2 Marlow on Kurtz
  5.2.3 Attitudinal
5.3 Apocalyptic/Mythic
5.4 Let Us Sum Up
5.5 Questions
5.6 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose in this concluding unit is to see the text as a modernist performance; its looming presence in twentieth century culture. The purpose, that is, is to see how it inaugurates certain artistic traditions to be identified as modernist traits, and also certain thematic aspects which will dominate twentieth century artistic predilections. We shall also see briefly how *Heart of Darkness* has been celebrated, condemned, imitated and resisted, but never neglected during the nearly 100 years of its life, as we approach the end of the century. We still see the heart of darkness in all its inscrutable complexity through the gaping mouth of Kurtz .

5.1 INTRODUCTION

I have said before that around the time when *Heart of Darkness* was published, a paradigm shift was underway: it was the era of new scepticism, philosophical and scientific, as well as of political upheaval. In the Arts the repercussions were being felt; and at the turn of the century Conrad's new work was hailed as having been "ahead of its times", "modern". The work itself became a symbol of what was new in a new way. Its reputation remained unchallenged, except for a few dissenting voices, by any major critic. Conrad himself was aware of his modernism. Or so it would appear from a letter he wrote to William Blackwood, where he said: "I am *modern*, and I would rather recall Wagner the musician and Rodin the Sculptor...and Whistler the painter....They too have arrived. They had to suffer for being 'new'. And I too hope to find my place in the rear of my betters. But still—my place." If not his immediate contemporaries, we at this stage, can see the point that Conrad makes here. If we recognise Eliot as the high-priest of modernism, and his *Waste Land* (1922) a high watermark in the movement, it would not be difficult at all to recognise Conrad's modernism. As you might well know, Eliot had originally placed a passage from *Heart of Darkness* as the epigraph to the poem. He withdrew it at the behest of fellow-modernist, Ezra Pound. Later, when Forster sent him a congratulatory letter, mentioning the pervasive element of horror in the poem, Eliot told him about the rejected epigraph, and how elucidative it was of the poem's theme. Anyway, epigraph or no, *Heart of Darkness* remains a looming presence in the poem. Eliot would go on to use another line from the same text as one of the epigraphs to "The Hollow Men" (1925), such was the impact of the tale on him. However, by the 1970s, when a fresh paradigm shift was underway, call it postmodernist, postcolonial or what you will, Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*, as indeed Wells, Kipling *et al*, were all seen as interesting cases of "Orientalism"; and were clubbed together as having been of their times: racist, sexist, imperialist, petit bourgeois....

But, as we have seen, pinning down Conrad to an ideology is far from easy. This is especially true of *Heart of Darkness*. For one thing he held different, often conflicting views on ideological issues at different points of time. For another, he uses the mask of Marlow, and complicates the point of view, and heaps up various ways of looking at truth—to such an

extent that the "real view" of Conrad is well-nigh impossible to grasp. The matter is complicated by the evasion that the narrator performs from time to time. As Ingram says, "the focus of the tale is never where the reader expects it to be."

Such evasion cripples the reader's understanding as much as the narrator's. Even Marlow gets intellectually crippled, and fails to grasp fuller meanings of his experiences. At the end we are not sure whether to put the emphasis on the political, existential, or metaphysical aspects of the tale. Politics is foregrounded no doubt; but as we have seen in some of the earlier sections, politics recedes into the background beyond recognition. We simplify, no doubt, to make sense of the narrative; maybe by saying that it is through the political scaffolding of the narrative that the metaphysical world of evil is explored. But we do so by severely limiting the scope of this complex work.

Conrad himself never believed in explicit statements; nor did he believe in any monologic method. It is this tendency, among others, that makes him so modern in comparison with his exact contemporaries barring Henry James. Some of the modernist methods, which he anticipates were, ambiguity and, distancing devices to effect impersonality, avoidance of the romanticising tendencies, and multiplicity of points of view. A few of these we have had occasion to look at in different contexts. Some others we shall take up presently.

5.2 AMBIGUITIES AND AMBIVALENCE

5.2.1 Title

This key component of ambiguity and evasion is what connects Conrad's novella to such other modernist works as Joyce's, Woolf's, and even Forster's.

From the title onwards the tale is replete with ambiguities and authorial/narratorial ambivalence. I think the title inaugurates the modernist tradition of titular ambiguity. (Among the more recent ones is that of *Waiting for Godot*.) As we have seen Conrad was ambivalent about the retention/rejection of the definite article. Perhaps with the definite article, the reference to darkness would have been unitary, and particular. Now the "darkness" in the title could be an allusion to the geographical appellation for Africa (as the "Dark Continent") then common among the "civilised" peoples of Europe. Marlow undoubtedly gives a vivid portrayal of the darkness of the centre of Africa. But he begins by referring to the Thames estuary and England as "one of the dark places of the earth", albeit in the past tense. Even Kurtz's tract begins by talking about the relativism innate to such notions as "civilisation", and "savage". This is borne out by Kurtz himself in the ultimate irony about his character: "Exterminate the brutes", is the post scriptum to this noble treatise. All the eloquence, and piety in the long tract is counterbalanced by the short sentence. This is the method ("No method at all"). The savagery of his method far exceeds the so-called savagery of the brutes. They had "restraint", whereas Kurtz and the rest had none. The grin that the heads on the poles wore are very similar in terms of mockery, the tongue stuck out at the end of "An Outpost of Progress". Both mock the proponents of the civilising mission. This leads directly to the literal meaning to the title. Is it a reference to Kurtz's own heart of darkness? Or that of the darkness within the European entrepreneur? If you have read the tale closely you will notice that the darkness of Africa (into this we shall turn presently) touches Kurtz and swallows him up.

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation....

Conrad uses what would soon become staple modernist diet: repetition and echo, immediate and distant. Almost repeating the theme of the above passage, Marlow echoes a little later:

> ...the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things

> about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core....

It is this self-realisation which overwhelms him, and prompts the cry: "Horror! The Horror!" Thus knowledge comes to him in a whisper. The booming voice is now nearly effectively silent. The eloquence was a sham— a mask for the profound hollowness within, just like the name. Memory is again a function of the thematic manipulations in a modernist work of art. This also seems to have been inaugurated by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness.* We are supposed, nay, expected to recall what has been said before. This recalling is possible through slight repetition. The following words about Kurtz occur to Marlow even before he met Kurtz: "the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." Thus one of the major discoveries of Marlow is this untrustworthiness of contrary categories. Light cannot be distinguished from darkness; nor the savage from the civilised. Conrad may also be thinking of the parallel between the material plunder of Africa and his own artistic plunder, the role of Kurtz and his own.

So far as the other ambiguities are concerned, the last cry or whisper of Kurtz "The horror! The horror!" is one of the most ambiguous dramatic utterances in modern literature. We ask ourselves, and fail to answer, what exactly this meant. Was this an ethical judgement against himself, or the sudden realisation of the evil that surrounded and eventually consumed him? The same ambivalence of Marlow about Kurtz, about the rationalisation of the lie he told the Intended continues to enrich the text in a manner we have learnt to expect of modern literature. After all the uncertainties about, and relativity of reality and experience, conscious and unconscious or subconscious states, relativism of science (Einstein), and the German physicist Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, the modern world can be sure of nothing. Hence Marlow's epistemological scepticism and moral relativism.

5.2.2 Marlow On Kurtz

The author of the main tale is of course Marlow; and critics have pointed out the similarities between Charlie Marlow's Faustian hero, Kurtz and Christopher Marlowe's play *Dr. Faustus.* But Marlow is, as we have seen on many occasions, not sure about his own attitude towards the hero of his yarn. He repeats that he was no admirer of Kurtz; the latter was no idol of his. But he was drawn towards him; just as he was attracted by the "mighty big river", as an "immense snake uncoiled" would attract a bird—a silly little bird". Marlow's ambivalence comes out clearly at times when he can't be sure of what to make of his experience: "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" Indeed, who could? As his narration is being relayed back to us by the frame narrator, he can be no less unreliable than Marlow himself here.

But Marlow's most challenging ambivalence is with regard to Kurtz. In fact, one of the prime factors contributing to the richness of the tale is this. Just as he is inexplicably drawn towards Kurtz, the reader too undergoes the same experience. The rivets that would fix the steamer to take Marlow to Kurtz constitute a metonym for the riveting nature of the narrative from the moment Kurtz is introduced. His first major task was to fix up "the wreck", which was under water and in ruins, but the context in which this appears one might mistake to be Kurtz.

Yet when we gather together his impressions of the chief protagonist of his tale, his value judgements seem to be in an aporetic state. On more occasions than one, Kurtz's world is haunted by agents of the devil, as much as the agents of the Company: Mephistophelean figures, snake-imagery, hissing sounds, flies. We have also seen direct evocations of evil all through. The first turnabout comes when Marlow, confronted by nightmares, chooses Kurtz, as the least frightening of them all:

> It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief—positively for relief. 'Nevertheless I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man,' I said with emphasis. He started, dropped on

> me a cold heavy glance, said very quietly 'he *was*,' and turned his back on me. My hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares.

Marlow remains faithful to the choice he has made. That is all. His judgement on Kurtz changes character, gets qualified; so much so he suspects he too has been a little like him.

> I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets.

He would soon tell the Russian that he was "Mr. Kurtz's friend—in a way". He is told about Kurtz's methods, but promises that Kurtz's reputation is safe with him. Until then he had no plans of being so faithful to Kurtz. It is only after he hears the last cry of complete self-knowledge that he makes up his mind. His employers had asked him to be loyal to Kurtz: "it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice", he says ironically. But the "foundations of [their] intimacy" with Kurtz were being laid when he was trying to save Kurtz, prevent his escape back into the wilderness, even when he was certain that the person he was trying to save could not have been "more irretrievably lost". He could sum up Kurtz's moral state quite accurately by saying that his soul was "unlawful" "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations." Kurtz was not mad; his intelligence, faculties remained unimpaired; but "his soul was mad". And at the very last he "looked within" and gave out that anguished cry. In that cry Marlow understood the real nature of man: "No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity". This last admission is the clue to our understanding of Marlow's ambivalence towards Kurtz. After he dies, Marlow calls him "the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgement upon the adventures of his soul on this earth". Marlow himself had a glimpse of the ultimate reality; but he could not make the pronouncement Kurtz could. Because Kurtz could sum up, could judge he "was a remarkable man". The last words were an "affirmation, a moral victory", Marlow says. "That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond...." He talks about his own status : he too had "peeped over the edge [himself]". This is very close to what he would say about the "great British Empire". "Respectable, venerable and holy", it had now disappeared, and "gone over the edge" (*Letters* I, p. 16).

5.2.3 Marlow's Lie To The Intended

I have cited Conrad's words about Marlow's interview with the girl. You may have gathered from those words how much importance he paid to the episode, which takes the narrative to "another plane". It now becomes "one suggestive view of a whole phase of life". The climax of that interview, and perhaps the second one of the entire narrative (the first one being the cry of Kurtz) is of course when Marlow tells the Intended the lie that the last word that Kurtz pronounced was her name, following which, he "heard a light sigh and then [his] heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exalting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain." Then she says, and Marlow reports, "I knew it – I was sure!" To this Marlow's ironical retrospective rejoinder is "She knew–she was sure". Why does Conrad climax the story at this point rather than sometime earlier? Why does Marlow tell a lie? Is it part of his decision to remain faithful to Kurtz? Many such questions contribute to the ambiguity of the end-configuration of the novella; and this kind of ending which raises more questions than answers, prefigures many a modernist ending: Is Stephen Dedalus an ironic portrayal in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*? Are the forms achieved by Mrs. Ramsay and by Lily Briscoe vital or illusory, set against the chaos of passing time in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse?* What did the *BOUM* sound signify; was Adela Quested really molested in Forster's *A Passage to India*? Does the lie make Marlow a misogynist or merely confirm the suspicion we already had? To some, Marlow's action is a natural sequel to his earlier assertion, "Its queer how out of touch with truth women are" as a sharp contrast to his own pride about truthfulness and his own quest for and fidelity to truth: He "brings truth to men by virtue of his bringing falsehood to women" (Straus). But is he telling a lie only to the Intended? Is he not suppressing the truth about Kurtz from his employers? What about the erasure he performs on Kurtz's "Report"? Also, his assurance to the "spectacled man" in the

Sepulchral city that Kurtz's knowledge would not have any impact on matters related to "commerce and administration" is comparable to the words of Yudhishtra about the death of Aswatthama. In the *Mahabharata,* this latter is considered a lie and as such constitutes a sin.

Just as Marlow's attitude towards Kurtz had undergone, change, so also his attitude towards women, particularly the Intended. When he sees the photograph he gets the following impression:

> She struck me as beautiful—I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie, too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and repose could have conveyed the delicate shade of *truthfulness* upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself. I concluded I would go and give her back her portrait and those letters myself.

In trying to rationalise, he cites one or two reasons, but then says, "I don't know. I can't tell". If he tells a lie it is not because of the same reasons he had cited earlier, not because he wanted her to live in the beautiful world of her own ("We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse", he had told his listeners). It was under extremely painful circumstances that he could not make himself tell the truth about Kurtz. Though he persuaded himself into believing that it was because of his fidelity towards Kurtz. He feels guilty on behalf of the world of men—because, in contrast to Kurtz, she was so true, "She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering": these are the values we know Conrad cared for, both as a seaman and writer—and must atone for by telling a lie, by keeping her in the dark. But this is mere surmise on my part, since Marlow himself does not know. We can never be sure. This is one of the great imponderables of modern literature.

5.3 APOCALYPTIC VISION

Apocalyptic vision of the collapse of the world becomes a prominent feature of modernist *Weltanschauung.* (Weltanschauung, as you may be aware, is a German word, that means worldview or the total idea of society and its purpose that a person or group has). This may not have followed from Spengler's *Decline of the West*, but for many historical and political reasons this became a widespread anxiety among creative artists, economists, political thinkers from around the turn of the century. In literature, implications were felt in some works with which you may be already familiar: Yeats's "Second Coming", Eliot's "The Waste Land", MacNiece's "Prayer for an Unborn Child", Auden's "Consider", to name a few. This is also evident in many paintings such as Picasso's "Guernica". What Frank Kermode has aptly called this anxiety "The Sense of an Ending", Watson calls it "The Myth of Catastrope". Kermode says further, "Apocalypse is a part of the modern Absurd".

Thus *Heart of Darkness* represents an early modernist manifesto in the direction of the apocalypse. We can detect Conrad's tug towards the eschatological, which means, towards the image of final, universal dissolution. This receives further confirmation and extension in Francis Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, where the scene is changed from Africa of the late ninteenth Century to Vietnam of the 1960s. Kurtz in his last words, "had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge.... The threshold of the invisible". And "darkness' becomes a concluding invocation in which everything—the "saving illusion" of the Intended's faith in an empty deal ; the listeners, the "tranquil waterway", and "the ends of the Earth"—are all swallowed up: "I had vision of [Kurtz] on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously , as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind".

5.4 THE USE OF MYTH

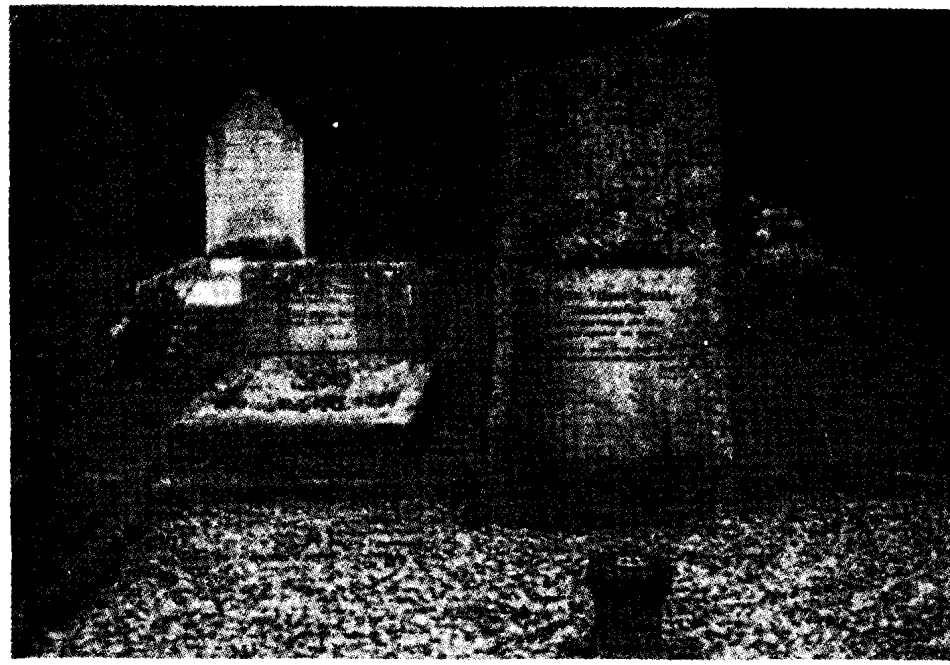
T.S. Eliot, who has himself used myths with such felicity and to such great effect in many of his poems especially in "The Waste Land", has given a formulation of the mythical ethos while extolling this technique in Joyce:

> In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him....It is a simple way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious.

Perceptive as Eliot is he seems to have forgotten his Conrad here. Or, is it because the latter's mythical method, as we shall see soon, is not of the kind Eliot had in mind? The conscious parallel that Conrad does draw is between distant and contemporary histories, as we have seen in the beginning of the narrative. But he seems to be alluding to, allegorising on, and even drawing on myths.

Myth of Faustus: The most obvious myth that he has integrated into the structure of *Heart of Darkness* is that of Faustus. Kurtz is a Faustian character; and is Charlie Marlow's answer to Christopher Marlowe's hero. Like his predecessor, he is extraordinarily gifted. Kurtz was "a remarkable man", Marlow never tires of telling us after his initial repugnance. He is said to have been a product of entire Europe: an allegorical figure for the European genius, and maybe, imperialism. But later he becomes a "universal genius". Here the ambiguity and irony needs to be recognised. He is all those talents combined: poet, musician, artist, explorer, rhetorician, would-be politician. But he is also someone who knows no restraint. Faustus too was unrestrained; and that was his tragic flaw. In spite of all his admiration for Kurtz, Marlow could still say, "His [Kurtz's] soul was mad".

Conrad's Grave



The Quest Myth: Frazer had begun publishing his monumental work, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) when *Heart of Darkness* was published. Soon Jessie Weston would publish her book on the Grail Legend drawing on Frazer's work. She explains the significance and symbolism of certain Arthurian romances which tell of the Quest for the Holy Grail by tracing them to their origin in the rituals of some ancient fertility gods, and by showing how they persisted throughout the intervening centuries. In these, the ruler of the land, the Fisher King suffers from a debilitating wound/disease. As a result his land is also cursed, and rots. He can be cured, and his land restored to fertility only if a hero/priest goes in quest of the Holy Grail in order to ask of it certain mysterious questions. He has to undergo several hardships and resist temptations to be able to carry out his objectives. Eliot's "The Waste Land" follows the pattern of this myth, but in a very subtle way, with other myths crowding in. The same is the case with *Heart of Darkness*.

The similarities and differences between the traditional Quest romance and Conrad's tale are easily seen. Kurtz undertakes the journey first, but in his quest he succumbs to temptations. Marlow embarks on another but uncertain quest; and his quest target undergoes shifts, until Kurtz himself, or rather the truth about the elusive hero, becomes his chief target. The quest does not end in expected results, and leads to further quests, which remain inconclusive. This is again a modernist method, in which older traditions are either subverted or adapted to suit the new needs.

Alternative Myths: The Christian myth of the corruption of Adam and Eve through temptation also dominates the imagery in the tale, with references to "the snake", "hissing", and Mephistopheles appearing now and then. This at once connects the tale to the other myth, that of Faustus.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

Thus we see that *Heart of Darkness* is indeed modern in more ways than one; and in certain ways ahead of its time. If it does occasionally appear to share some of the contemporary cultural prejudices, we need to take a closer look to see if appearances are deceptive. If confirmed, the prejudices strengthen the text's claims for transcending the other prejudices. Also, Conrad perceived the difference between the earlier attitudes and the emergent attitudes sooner than most of his contemporaries, and registered these in his works, especially in the tale under consideration. His own responses were quite complex as we have seen. If we are aware of this complexity it would entail recognition of a current critical habit. The past is reductively falsified in order to justify the political "correctness" of the present. *Heart of Darkness* exposes this habit in its earlier avatar, the "civilising mission".

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Connect what is initillay referred to as the fascination of the abomination to what Marlow experiences later. Does he evince the same kind of fascination?

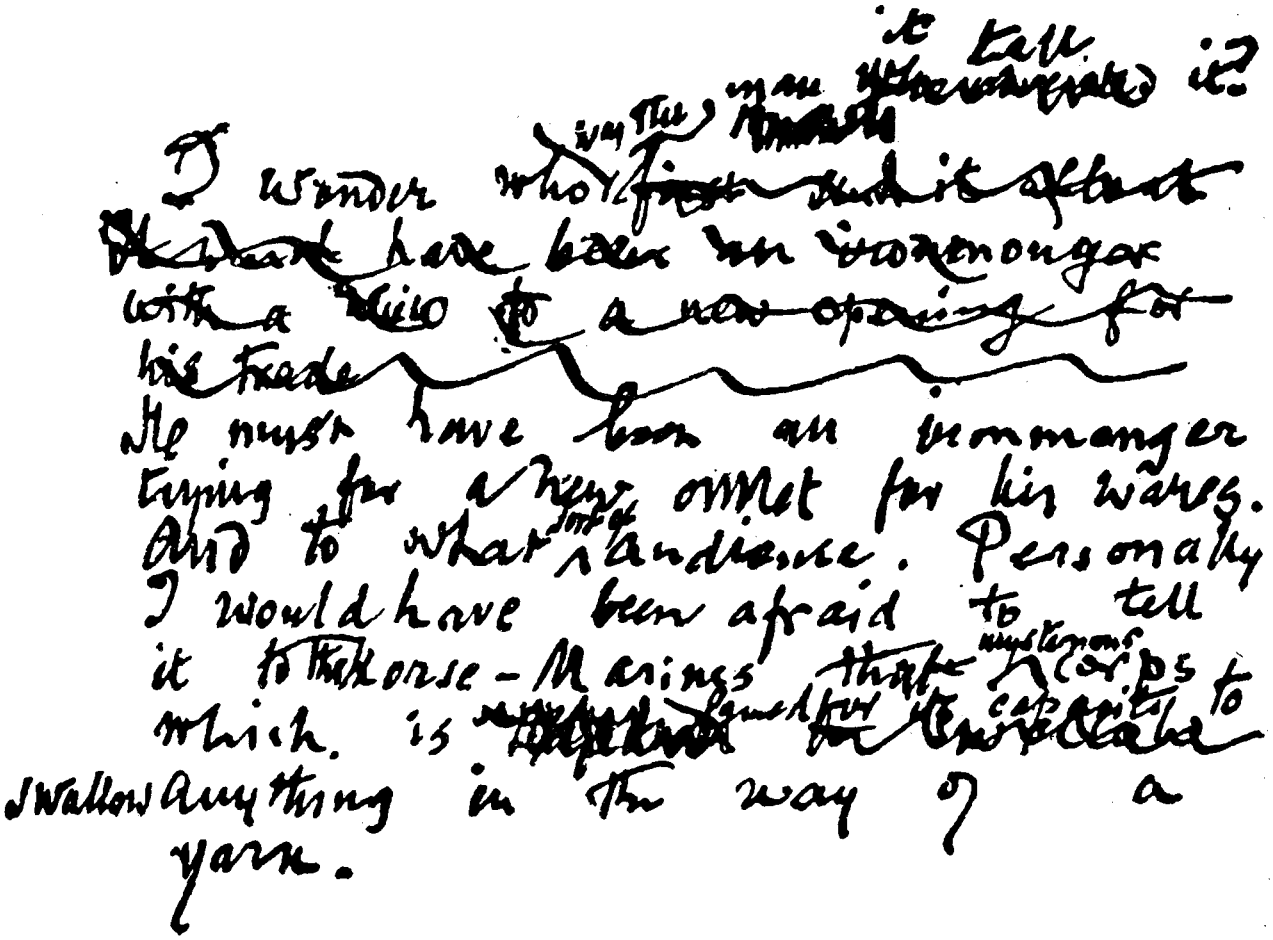
2. What is your view of the depiction of the two or three white women and the black women? Is Marlow a misogynist?

3. How does Conrad employ irony in depicting "progress" in the civilising work in Africa?

4. Do you think political-ideological reading of a literary work comes in the way of our enjoyment of it? Discuss.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

Cedric Watts. *Conrad's "Heart of Darkness": A Critical and Contextual Discussion.* Milan, 1977.



The Last Words that Conrad Wrote